

St Paul says that those who are not interested in spiritual things cannot please God; the phrase he uses in the original text is 'living in the flesh'. He doesn't mean that the body is unpleasing to God; he means that those who live as though there was *nothing but* the body – no soul, no spirit – can't even know God, let alone please him.

On the other hand, if we *are* interested in spiritual things – his phrase is 'living in the spirit' – it means we acknowledge and accept our bodies as belonging to creation, as a part of our individuality... but we always locate our true identity in the spirit.

St Paul uses two words in Greek: *soma*, which means 'body' and *sarx*, which means 'flesh'. It's quite important to understand the difference between the two, because when St Paul talks about 'living in the flesh' and the flesh being the repository of sin and the flesh availing us nothing, he uses the word *sarx*. He isn't talking about our individual physical bodies, but our creatureliness, our moral weakness, our tendency to sin, the pain and impermanence of all flesh. In other words, *sarx* is a *condition*. The human condition.

On the other hand, he uses the word *soma* for the physical body. Then body is our means of living this life, it gives us the delight and joy of the senses, from acts of love, through the pleasures of the table, to the appreciation of art and music. It is not a condition – it is a vessel. The body is the visibility of the soul: it is

the soul made visible in concrete form. If we want to put an irritating person in their place, we need a tongue and a mouth to do it; if we want to commit some act of violence upon another, we need our hands to do it; and if we care to indulge in illicit pleasures, we need a body for that.

If on the other hand we wish to be friendly to another person, we need lips to smile and eyes to crinkle; if we are inspired to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless – or engage in *any* act of loving kindness – we need our body. In other words, our body can do good things or bad things according to how it is directed by the soul.

All this is a part of St Paul's message.

By and large, over the centuries, the Church has not been very kind to the poor old body, regarding it as a regrettable necessity, a source of temptation and sin and far less significant than the soul. There have been saner voices. Throughout the centuries: the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, who wrote the famous text *Revelations of Divine Love*, was adamant that God's glory dwells also in our bodies. This was completely contrary to the spirit of her age, which derided the body, encouraged bodily penance and generally held it in contempt.

St Teresa of Avila, when she was describing the mystical ecstasies that she regularly experienced, said that although they were spiritual in nature, the

body had a share in them – “even,” she says, “a large share.”

I can't resist finishing with a quote from Julian of Norwich which I've shared before. In Chapter 6 of her Revelations, the medieval English mystic is speaking of the goodness of God, and she gives an example of how that goodness is active in our lives; she wants to show how good God is. Astonishingly – startlingly, you could say – the example she chooses us a bowel movement. She says:

“For God does not despise what he has created, and he does not hold back from serving us, even in our lowest natural bodily need. (...) A person walks upright and the food in their body is sealed up as in a beautiful purse; and when their time of necessity comes, it opens and then it closes again, all simply and honestly. And this, I tell you, is due to the goodness of God.”

Only the Holy Spirit, whose coming we celebrate this day, could possibly have taught her that.