



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 1st October 2023**

**Readings: Ezekiel 18; Psalm 25.1-9; Philippians 2.5-11; Matthew 21.28-32**

**Trinity XVII**

The idea of joining something is not as common as it used to be, whether it is a political party, a bowls club, or a charity needing trustees for its board.

Even where interest does remain, there is less frequently a sense that formal membership is necessary. Take those political parties gathering at the moment for their conferences. When appropriate, people still vote for them, but they no longer belong as once they did. The Conservative Party had three million members in the 1950s and in Manchester this afternoon delegates will be representing just 173,000 members, just as Labour in the fifties had a million members whereas next Sunday in Liverpool, they'll be there on behalf of just 400,000.

The Church experiences this phenomenon, often to an alarming degree. A generation ago, the United Reformed congregations in the centre of Cambridge had five times the membership we now enjoy; and like political parties, we could opine that we have far more supporters than members. We might go on to explain fewer members by speaking of changing attitudes to institutions, to authority, and to over-arching, universal truths that try to explain everything – so-called 'meta-narratives'.

Maybe what we heard from Ezekiel goes some way towards explaining today's scepticism about God. 'It's not fair!' isn't only a cry common to kids. In the way society is ordered, in the way that cake is divided at teatime, and in that metanarrative about how and why things are the way they are, we look for fairness. God's apparent willingness to punish children for their parents' faults *doesn't* seem fair - like sour grapes that set the teeth on edge. After all, the Ten Commandments were given with the stick that disobeying them would have consequences 'unto the third and fourth generation'.<sup>1</sup> It is true, Ezekiel hears God trying to answer the charge that it's not fair, protesting that the answer to not paying the price for sin is not to sin. As one commentator sums God up: "Why do you want to perish? I do not want you to. Live!"<sup>2</sup> But ultimately, the unfairness charge continues to stick on the divine reputation. And it's an easy argument for us to use if we're inclined to scepticism in the first place.

Add to that the true-to-life story from Jesus that St Matthew just gave us, and we can see all the more why loyal membership is a slippery concept. We heard of two sons whose father tries to enlist them for a few jobs in the vineyard. Both respond in ways that could so easily reflect you and me. One says 'yes', but doesn't then go. Have we ever let someone down by giving the impression we'd do something but not actually coming up with the goods? And the other says 'no', but then thinks again, and eventually gets himself to where the action is. I get why it's this second one who earns Jesus' approval. I'm not actually thinking of the contrast that Jesus might be making between the religious elite of his day who say one thing and do another, and those outcast by society but who still believe in God. No, I'm thinking of me, of you.

We do not belong to the church to protest that we are perfect – never put a foot wrong. Just that we take the God we see in Jesus seriously enough that we'll keep trying to walk the way of the honest, kind and merciful living to which Jesus calls us, even if our start is a bit faltering and our tendency to diversions a little too frequent;

Nor do we belong to the church because every theological argument is so obvious, so cut and dried for us, that we can give an instant 'yes', and never struggle to think anything through because it is all so believable. No, if you are like me, life sometimes seems just as unfair to us as it did to

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20.5

<sup>2</sup> Jenson, Robert W. 2009 *Ezekiel: SCM Theological Commentaries on the Bible* London: SCM Press page 149

Ezekiel's contemporaries. But, if we have questions, let's not walk away from the source of the answers. Rather let's stick with God ... a life-long journey of discovery, of debate, of disagreement, of hurling the metaphorical saucer at God, but knowing God doesn't hurl it back.

Nor do we belong to the church solely for what we can get out of it, and then give up on it when the demands are more than we like. 'Have the same mind that was in Christ', Paul told the Philippians. 'Serve one another as Jesus served us all – and that even when it took him to the cross.'

Ultimately, you see, belonging to the Body of Christ is fundamentally different from belonging to a charity's board of trustees, or the bowling club, or a political party. Signing up for church membership is about a covenant. In making us, saving us, and accompanying us through life and beyond death, God is in covenant with us. 'You will be my people, and I will be your God.'<sup>3</sup> 'I will be your God with love and mercy; the same love and mercy I have shown for a very long time.' Being part of the church is our answer to that covenant. It's our 'Yes' to God in reply to God's 'Yes' to us. It's our 'OK, I've seen enough to trust there is more that can hold me in my vulnerability, ground me in my success, and prod me in my complacency.' It's putting our hand into God's nail-marked hand, and knowing ourselves to have come home.

Occasionally at communion, and sometimes at a funeral, we hear the words of George Herbert.<sup>4</sup> We did so last Monday. He tries to hold God at bay, protesting that he is too sinful to be entitled to God's love. When God persuades him that sin is sorted, Herbert says, '... then I will serve.' 'No', Herbert hears Love say: 'You must sit down... and taste my meat.' So I did sit and eat.'

That is the metanarrative. It isn't fair; it's grace. And the fellowship of those who thus sit and eat is the membership into which, with great joy, we welcome Alex, and Helen, and Jo, and Robert, and Sonya today.

Let's live!

Amen

N. P. Uden

1<sup>st</sup> October 2023

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 30.22

<sup>4</sup> Herbert, George, from the poem, *Love*, in *The Temple* 1633