



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 20th July 2025

Readings: *Genesis 18:1-10a; Colossians 1.15-28; Luke 10.28-32*

Trinity V

Earlier in the service, an All Ages item had reflected upon the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10.28-32. Mary was depicted sitting at Jesus' feet on a cushion, as we recognised the importance of Jesus' followers metaphorically doing so, listening, learning, feeding on his thoughts and words, and praying. Martha was depicted with a kettle and a mug, busy serving Jesus. His followers might also use the kettle to make drinks that typically accompany the work of the Church: for example, hospitality, counselling, evangelism, discipling, feeding hungry people. In the church we concluded that in our emulating Martha and Mary it is not either the cushion or the kettle; it's both/and.

On these final two Sundays of my fulltime ministry, I would like to focus first upon The Church, and then next week, upon the Lord's Prayer.

My late father was concerned about me becoming a minister. He feared I would be poor and bored. Well, in terms of poverty, by the generosity of the United Reformed Church, and not least this congregation's extraordinary contribution to the Ministry and Mission Fund, we have always had enough, and by global standards, an embarrassment of riches.

As to boredom, well, that simply is not my experience. I began my ministry on 1st September 1984, and no two of the 14,963 days since have ever been the same. In those forty years, I have held six different posts, each truly stimulating, completely varied, and a privilege. Moreover, I have known the real benefits that come from seeing the church in a dozen countries and from working in it in two that were profoundly contrasting. So, not bored, either. I affirm the wisdom of the one who said, 'Ministry is not my gift to the Church, but the church's gift to me.'¹

As I ponder all that, and reflect upon this morning's readings, I recognise four characteristics of the church that have made serving it such an enriching way of life, and that seem to me to be key to discerning who you are to be in the next adventurous chapter of Downing Place Church, and of my own discipleship, newly minted by retirement.

The **first** is that axiomatic combination of worship and service - of cushion and kettle - that Mary and Martha model for us.

The **second** is that The Church is defined and shaped by constantly receiving God anew in every generation. In the narrative of Abraham greeting the three visitors by the oaks of Mamre, we are offered a beautiful image of how God comes to us. It is not always – perhaps not often – in startlingly obvious ways. Much more frequently it is in those we encounter, or the situations we face: the wise teacher, the caring friend, the needful strangers, the crisis that stirs our compassion, or forces the re-setting of our philosophical compass. In all of those, we might discern the presence and the activity of God. We may not all be affected by that presence of God as Sarah was, with the birth of a child when she was well on in years, but even that image prompts us to be alert to God making Godself present and known in unexpected and even miraculous ways. May God prevent us closing our eyes, our minds and our hearts, to being surprised by joy and arrested by the unanticipated. We may even entertain angels.²

Above all, The Church is defined and shaped by constantly receiving God as God is in Jesus. Jesus, says Paul to the Colossians, is the one 'in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell'. That is why the Church is a community that constantly exposes itself to Jesus, in the Word and Sacraments, and in a lifestyle that is modelled on who Jesus is as a revelation of God.

¹ Esau, John (2003) from *Ten things I didn't learn in seminary*, an article in *Christian Century*, 22nd February 2003

² Hebrews 13.2

I was at a primary school leavers' service this week, and heard the head teacher exhort her young charges to four things: thanksgiving, love, courage, and wonder.³ I can't think of four better foci if we wish with Abraham and Sarah, and with all people of faith, to encounter God, and to find ourselves, even in our old age, giving birth to a new generation of faith-filled and faithful people. Thanksgiving, love, courage and wonder.

After *worship & service* and *receiving God as God is in Jesus*, the **third** characteristic of the church that I experienced over the years is *reconciliation*. Paul is clear in these words to the Colossians, that the Church is the community of the reconciled: those who know themselves put right with God and with each other. I have never been a perfect minister, nor have I ever served a perfect Church. We have been mutually flawed, and that is good because it saves any of us being puffed up with pride or self-righteousness – at least, not justifiably. Out of the humility that defectiveness inspires, we can know ourselves to be in need of God's grace, and of God's willingness to forgive and accept us as we are. And such is the God whom Jesus shows us. This God doesn't say, 'Ace; you have a starred first in discipleship. I'll accept you.' Instead, welcoming, embracing and accepting us as we are, God says, 'I do not condemn you; go and sin no more.'⁴ Treated thus by God, we are stirred to be similarly reconciled to one another. From time to time, in church life as much as in the workplace or the home, we may need to apologise; we may need to make amends. But, inspired by being reconciled to God, we are equipped to learn from our mistakes, to burden no-one with the unbearable demands of being a paragon of virtue, and rather to start again, wiser, better, humbler ... 'wounded healers' who are more useful to God.

Worship & service, and *receiving God as God is in Jesus*, and *reconciled*. The **fourth** characteristic of the Church to which our readings point us, is *conforming to the image of Christ*. Colossians 1.24 can sound a bit like a riddle: 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.'

Read superficially and naively, Paul might seem to be suggesting that there is something lacking in the afflictions that Christ endured. But surely, in the graphic image of Christ bearing our sins in his own body on the cross, we are assured that he suffered all that was needed, and more. Grappling with this confusion, commentators offer the idea that what Paul means is that it is *his own suffering* for Christ's sake that is lacking. Although he had suffered much affliction – persecution, beating, shipwreck, imprisonment, and so on - Paul claims that he was not yet conformed to the image of Christ. I wonder if what we are meant to hear here is that being Christ's servants – as The Church is collectively and as disciples are individually – is a costly thing? It's not only sitting adoringly at Jesus' feet. When I examine my own life, I do not think I have suffered for Christ in a way that would earn me a chapter in the Acts of the Apostles. But nor do I think that doing so is an essential hallmark of credible discipleship. What I think Paul gives us is an exhortation to commitment. Now, let me be clear, although we may not face persecution, beating, shipwreck, imprisonment, let us not forget those allegedly 365 million Christians in today's world who do suffer persecution, such as Christians in large parts of Asia and Africa, where some are even victim to state sponsored persecution of Christians. That said, persecution or not, authentically following Christ is not meant to be a walk in the park. It's meant to be a circumstance where we know ourselves loved, but it is also a lifestyle choice that involves commitment and sacrifice, determination and resilience, stumbling and starting again. Paul urges us – Marys and Marthas alike – to be conformed to Christ in our readiness not only to lift high the cross but also to bear it – to bear the cross of authentic discipleship so that the grace and truth which God reveals in Jesus on the cross might be made known in our generation, until says Paul, everyone is presented mature in Christ.

Worship & service, and *receiving God as God is in Jesus*, and *reconciled*, and *conforming to the image of Christ*.

As to Colossae, so to us, St Paul helps us understand what it is to be the Church. I don't know in what ways I will be faithful to that in the future; they will be new to me. And nor do I know what the next

³ Leavers' Assembly, St Nicholas' Primary Academy, Great Wilbraham 17th July 2025

⁴ John 8.11

chapter of Downing Place Church will be ... except that I trust what Paul said to another church he was encouraging:

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and ... will do this. ⁵

Poor and bored? No, wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, and fulfilled by serving the mission of the One who offers life all its fulness. ⁶ What's not to like?

Thanks be to God.

N. P. Uden

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⁵ I Thessalonians 5.23f

⁶ John 10.10