



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 27th February 2022
Readings: *Luke 18.18-30 & II Corinthians 9*

The Finance Committee and the Treasurer have asked me to speak once a year about stewardship – our giving to the church. Today is the day we selected, though, as it happens, the situation in Ukraine inevitably crowds in upon our thinking and I will not ignore it. Indeed, a few minutes into the sermon, we will punctuate it with that Kyrie eleison from Ukraine which is at 776 in your hymn books: Lord have mercy. But I get ahead of myself.

As we think about stewardship, maybe we should begin by wondering

- why on earth we might be part of the church?
- what's its relevance and worth today?
- why give to it of our money or our effort?

Well, for me there immediately come to mind four purposes for the church with which I wish steadfastly to associate myself.

First, it's important for the Church to speak in the public square about current events. After all, the Hebrew prophets did it repeatedly, whenever their world was in crisis. And Jesus has something to say about the issues of the day, too.

We awoke on Thursday morning to a world in which one country felt at liberty to invade another. As one historian puts it, 'Conflict is a choice.'¹ In other words, we don't have to be the first to choose conflict. That said, the fear of someone else making that choice is not something new. Many of you will recall President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972. In fact, he returned to Washington from Shanghai fifty years ago today. The two nations had signed a communique the night before, which affirmed the need for détente; to choose peace-making. Subsequently, an opera appeared, *Nixon in China*, by John Adams. He was interpreting this extraordinary meeting of President Nixon and Chairman Mao, using a libretto in poetic couplets written by Alice Goodman. She is now the Rector of Fulbourn, and therefore my ecumenical partner in that village. As Alice tells of the arguing that punctuated the writing of the opera, she observes, 'We have done our best to make our disagreements counterpoints; not to drown each other out, but each to be as eloquent as possible.'² With that musical analogy, might she be helping us to see to how two ideas or even cultures can choose to contrast without competing through conflict?

How vital it is for that commitment to shape the story of contemporary Ukraine. That being so, I believe it remains an obligation for people of faith, alongside all people of philanthropic convictions, to bring from their religion's thinking prophetic words of wisdom, and sometimes of censure, too. Faith in God is not about shifting responsibility onto a deity to sort out the world's mess, but to let the wisdom from that deity inspire our choice of reconciliation. Maybe reconciliation is well understood as a supremely eloquent counterpoint. If the Church, walking the way of Jesus Christ, cannot commit itself to such peace-making at this time, then it has lamentably lost its way.

Sung Ukrainian Kyrie –

Kyrie eleison

Christe eleison

Kyrie eleison

¹ Redmond, Joan, in private conversation on 26th February 2022.

² Goodman, Alice 1987 *Nixon in China* (CD booklet) New York: Electra/Asylum/Nonsuch Records page 13

Secondly, what about the place of the Church in a world shaped by things like Covid-19? With millions of people, including in the United Kingdom, still inadequately vaccinated, does it not remain a privilege for people of faith to be alongside all people of goodwill in offering life-giving good works? How good that, over the last few months, this church has been able to host the free distribution of Lateral Flow Test kits several times a week. Convinced that we are ‘our brother’s keeper’³ - not least when we are all affected by a pandemic – I believe the Church is called to enable the bearing of one another’s burdens.⁴ Moreover, that’s not just when it is convenient or comfortable, but whenever the Church can emulate Christ’s kenosis, that self-emptying, by which he died that we might live.

Thirdly, which of us has never known trials or temptations or tragedies in our life? It is the pastor’s privilege to know as much as many, and more than most about people’s concerns. The Church is a community where your joy is my joy and your pain is my pain. We cannot take away the vicissitudes that visit us, but when it is wanted, we can accompany one another through them, with the card of sympathy, the phone call of solidarity, the casserole of practical help, the fluently silent vigil of support. When, in down to earth ways, it lives out the love it proclaims, the Church really is being the Body of Christ.

And **fourthly**, the Church has a primary calling to point the world to God, as God is in Jesus Christ. How easy it is to hide behind the theological mantra that God is everywhere. But, as Ronald Rolheiser has discerned, ‘a God who is everywhere, can just as easily be nowhere’.⁵ Even God Godself realises that, as we see when the Word becomes flesh and dwells amongst us, full of the truth about God and of the grace that is God – ‘joy of heaven to earth come down’.⁶ And is it not a truth universally acknowledged, even by the most agnostic amongst us, that ultimately all but a few of us will sometimes need ‘God with a skin on’ – God made real by the Church? And where the Church can offer God in Christ to struggling and failing and forsaken people as much as it does to successful and flourishing and cherished ones, we are being what Christ calls us to be, his witnesses, so that people might choose God, just as Jesus is the proof that God chooses us.

So, yes, I want to affirm the Church’s relevance and worth,

- as a prophetic voice in a bellicose world,
- as a charitable instrument in a suffering world,
- as a pastoral presence in an aching world,
- and as incarnate witness in a seeking world.

How I honour you, Downing Place Church, for every sense in which that is what we are. And how I covet you for that sort of ministry where it remains something we aspire to, but haven’t yet achieved. You see, it’s about what the choir sang – ‘showing forth in our lives what we believe in our hearts’.⁷

Of course, none of that just happens. The Church cannot be prophetic, charitable, pastoral or incarnational without the very people who comprise it offering themselves. Alliterative sermons tend to be ridiculed, but when it comes to stewardship – the giving of what and who we are so that the church can be the church – surely, it is about our gifts of **T**ime, **T**alent and **T**reasure.

In terms of *time*, much of what the Church needs is less to do with our ability, and more about our *availability*. It’s the time to do this, the time to attend that, the time to sit with A, the time to work in partnership with B. Or the time to take on a leadership role as they become vacant in the future.

³ Genesis 4.9

⁴ Galatians 6.2

⁵ Rolheiser, Ronald 1998, 1999, 2014, 2019 *The Holy Longing: the search for a Christian spirituality* New York: Image, page 77

⁶ Charles Wesley 1707-88, from the hymn *Love divine, all loves excelling* (CH4 519.5-8)

⁷ from the *Chorister’s Prayer* of the Royal School of Church Music

As for *talent*, so often we feel intimidated by what someone else can bring to the ecclesiastical party – their skills, their caring, their faith and their piety. But God does not ask us to be so impressed with someone else that we end up feeling useless by comparison. Rather, God asks us to be honest about our own skills and abilities, our own experience and achievements, and to gift something of those to the ministry and mission of the Church. It might be we can organise, or maybe it's that we can pray, or is it that we have a facility with figures or computers, policies or flowers, music or drama? or that we love as we have been loved? Whatever we are, the Church needs us all.

And when it comes to *treasure*, money, it's one thing to have the resources to redevelop our premises as we have, but quite another to balance the annual books and sustain the initiatives that enable us to be the prophetic, pastoral, and incarnational community Emmanuel and St Columba's came together more effectively to be. We are ever so grateful for all that each of you donates year by year. Indeed, I feel seriously privileged to serve so financially stable a church; many of my colleagues don't. Nonetheless, as we encounter inflation on the steady increase, may I invite you to examine your giving, please, in order to ensure that to those who follow us we can hand on something as stable as what we inherited?

As we ponder stewardship in this threefold sense, I sense that Jesus' challenge to the rich ruler is of fundamental significance. Surely, we can understand his dilemmas as the young rabbi says he must sell all he has and give it to the poor. It's not so much that he's being asked to give more as it is about being willing to withhold less. Ultimately, we are not complete without each one offering their time, talent and treasure. In our readings this morning I hear Jesus promise that such giving will be rewarded, in a way that withholding – or giving sparingly - cannot possibly be.

Similarly, we heard Paul encourage people's generosity. He, too, is seeking gifts for the work of the church – it's the one in Jerusalem. He identifies a couple of ideas to motivate the Corinthians' giving: the priceless work of God's grace, expressed through the living, the dying and the rising of Jesus Christ. Paul refers to that as God's 'indescribable gift.' And he also speaks of the interdependence of different parts of the body; how when one part is in need it is the privilege of another part to assist, confident that if the boot were on the other foot the same would pertain.

And then Paul uses various words to characterise the Christian's giving to the life of the Church. It is to be from the heart; to be more cheerful than grudging; more liberal than sparing; more voluntary than compulsory; more about gratitude than obligation; more about benevolence toward others than mere expectations.

And so on a weekend when our eyes are on Ukraine, to talk of stewardship is not to be seek the feathering of this church's nest, but the enabling of that ministry of reconciliation by which God, in Christ, chose to heal the world. It is for *that* that we offer our time, talent and treasure, praying nothing more urgently than that the unbounded love of God will visit every trembling heart so God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen

N. P. Uden

27th February 2022