



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 3rd September 2023

Readings: *Jeremiah 15.15-21, Romans 12.9-21 & Matthew 16.21-28*

Trinity XIII

There are many roles that hold leadership and service, in a creative tension.

- Think of elected office, be it in government or opposition, locally, nationally or globally. The Prime Minister, and our local ward councillor are both leaders and servants.
- Think of education: school, university, on the job – the teacher is at once both serving and leading the learner.
- Think of those in vocations – the emergency services, the medical profession, aid agencies, commerce, industrial and third sector personnel, and so on – such roles balance serving and leading, altruism with responsibility.
- Then there's the school governor, the charity trustee, the campaigner for justice – at once, they give for the sake of others, whilst needing to assume to some degree leadership profile.
- And yes, think of The Church, too, where all sorts of positions - eldership, children's and youth work, pastoral carers committed to the flourishing of others, any number of volunteers, and, of course, ministers of The Word and Sacraments, each one is an intricate cord that combines leadership and servanthood.

And it is a challenge, not least because anyone who exercises such a function is as human as you and me; motives may be unimpeachable, but mistakes are made. Moreover, performance will be watched, standards will be required, results will be looked for, personality will be critiqued, flaws will be highlighted, and before you know it, character will be assassinated.

In this morning's three Bible readings, something of this was hinted at. Each one was about authentic Christian life and work - what Rowan Williams calls 'seeing what God is doing and joining in with it' - and none of the readings suggested that it was a walk in the park. Indeed, each one stressing how intense conflict can be.

We heard how Jeremiah (like many another prophet before and after him) was thoroughly fed up, feeling that others were against him, and that God was no more help than a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. The Lord's reply was not entirely comfortable: 'If you turn back [to me], I will take you back.' The Lord is also clear that others will 'fight against you', ... but they won't prevail. We're left with the impression that working for God bears a certain vulnerability.

Then we heard St Paul giving the Church in Rome his blueprint for a true Christian – persevere, do not lag in zeal, overcome evil with good, be ardent, outdo one another. No pressure there, then.

And Jesus completes the sequence: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' The cross – summed up by Alan Gaunt as being where Jesus 'finished all the covenant requires' – the cross is a big ask. I don't for one moment believe that you and I are to be crucified, hung on a tree and left to die – though in 2023, it is thought that around the world a dozen people every day *do* die because they are Christian – but just as the cross was how Jesus embodied the forever love of God towards creation, so might that be what it means for us to take up our cross – to work out how we can make real in today's world, the forever love of God - here and now? I sense this embodying of God's undefeatable love is somewhere at the core of what it means for us to live under God's reign, to seek the Kingdom of God.

And, in truth, I don't think that is easy. I am not even persuaded that it is meant to be easy. Paul goes to the heart of it when he speaks of overcoming evil with good. There is something immensely significant, but also immensely challenging about aspiring to supplant the death-dealing with the

life-giving, and as we look around us, it is clear there is such a task urgently and persistently to pursue. It requires a potent combination of servanthood and leadership, for we do not fulfil the purposes of God's reign without getting on our knees to wash the world's dirty, smelly, ugly feet, but nor do we do so without discerning when to give the lead of a risky initiative, of an outspoken word, or of an exciting example for others to emulate.

But is not the enormity of joining in with what God is doing precisely what makes it worthwhile? The Christian understanding of God is that God creates and redeems all that is. Caught-up in all of that in 2023, God's creating and redeeming seems to be an on-going project. God's inviolate covenant with creation suggests God is in it for the long haul; that God will not forsake, but accompany; not reject, but restore. And to be on-side with God in that is indeed demanding. But is it not also what we're here for? The tales of creation in the book Genesis teach us that we were set here to be partners with God, stewarding creation with responsibility, and loving one another as God loves us. How much more meaningful a life could we ask for? Even as it calls out of us a depth of service and height of leadership, so it fulfils our greatest purpose, to glorify God and enjoy God forever, as the Shorter Catechism peerlessly puts it.

So, to conclude, where do we gain the inspiration, the strength, the durability for this life of authentic Christian living?

- We might say, 'hard graft', balanced with a proper regard for the work-life balance modelled by the Creator resting on the seventh day. Amen to that.
- We might say, 'the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, that 'enemy of apathy' from whom comes the requisite faith, hope and love. Amen to that.
- And we might also say, 'come to this table'.

You see, here we remember, recalling that cross of Christ, yet also his resurrection. This sacrament has a retrospective aspect, which absorbs us in what God did once and for all at Calvary. There God's love was given ultimate expression. There God's love demonstrated its resilience, in that glorious image of the grave's inability to confine him. And here the broken bread and poured-out wine remind us that there is a price, and God paid it.

Just as here we remember what God *once* did, so here we also enjoy what God is still doing. As we take the bread and wine to ourselves, part of their purpose is to bring us into an encounter with God. You see, we do not just *hold* the elements; we *consume* them. The bread and wine literally become part of us. Might that signify how what God once did, God does for you and me? In our communion hymn, G. Y. Tickle expressed it like this:

And when the loaf we break, thine own rich blessing give,
may all with loving hearts partake, and all new strength receive;
thankful that whilst we view thy body bruised and torn,
life, health, and healing *still accrue*, from stripes which thou hast borne.

And finally, knowing ourselves called to live a Christian life, as we come to this table here is a future perspective, too. It's not just about remembering what was, nor enjoying what is, but trusting for what shall be. In St Paul's words about how this meal was first celebrated the night before Jesus died, it is clear that another purpose of Holy Communion is to point us to the future. The apostle writes, 'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' Just as 'we may not know and cannot tell what pains he had to bear', so, too, we do not know how God will bring all things to completion. Nonetheless, at this meal we are given a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, which signifies the promise that God is still creating and redeeming, and will bring all things to lavish completion. Why wouldn't a meal signify that? Whenever we have something to celebrate, we go out for a meal, and in a sense what matters is less what is said there and more the rich symbolism of reconciled fellowship. And so it is with the

Christian hope. We're sustained for the mystery of what it will be by this meal, foreshadowing an ultimate meal of joy and love.

Until then, come to this table, not because we must but because we may, and to be inspired, strengthened, and equipped for our Christian living. And as the Lord promised to be with Jeremiah, so may the Spirit that was in Christ be in us, living water by which we will not thirst, bread of life by which we never hunger. So be it. Amen

N. P. Uden

3rd September 2023