



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 2nd October 2022

Jubilee of the United Reformed Church

Readings: Lamentations 1:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Sharing Together

[During the all-age Sharing Together address, some pictures are projected onto the screen behind the speaker. These include images of Westminster Abbey and Westminster Central Hall (exterior)].

How many of you recognise this building? How many have visited it? How many have been to a service there? We are remembering today something significant that happened fifty years ago this week. On the morning of 5 October 1972 in Westminster Central Hall, opposite the Abbey, at a combined meeting of the Assemblies of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England, the two Churches united by unanimous votes of each separately and then both together. In the afternoon even more people from both Churches gathered in the Abbey for a Service of Thanksgiving for the union achieved that morning. A few of us here today were at that service: would you like to show us who you are? It was a significant moment, precisely because the Abbey has a special place in our own history. From 1643 to 1647 a group of Christian leaders had met on the instructions of Parliament to draw up a new statement of faith for the Church of England. When it was finished in 1646, the English parliament rejected it; but it was accepted in Scotland. The main points in it were also accepted by many in England, who after the return of Charles II in 1660 became nonconformists, some gladly, others reluctantly. What happened in 1972 brought some of those two groups together. We hoped then that our new Church might be the starting point for bringing all the Churches in this country together, but that did not happen, despite our efforts. So we celebrate the fact that we are fifty years old with mixed feelings of happiness and sadness. Afterwards you will be able to enjoy some birthday cake with your coffee, tea or fruit juice. It's a birthday for all of us!

Sermon

When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done' (Luke 17:10).

It was not easy to choose a text for today. and for a long time I wondered about Luke 17:5, 'Lord, increase our faith'; eventually I chose the last verse of our Gospel lesson – 'we have done only what we ought to have done (v 10). I wrote the first draft of this sermon a month ago, and a lot has happened since then. Most important was the death of Her Majesty the Queen on 8 September. This has led to a greater emphasis on the significance of the ideals of duty and service than has been common in recent years. They were exemplified in her broadcast 21st birthday address from Cape Town in 1947 – words, which it is now suggested the Princess may have inserted herself into the draft prepared by the King's Private Secretary, making them very much her own.

This is the fourth time I have preached since the end of August, when I began again after the pandemic and my own replacement knee surgery. In all I have been drawn to the hard sayings of Jesus scattered through this part of Luke's Gospel. We have by no means reached the end of them, and they all come as Jesus and the Twelve were making their way to Jerusalem, away from the relative safety of Galilee – a journey that ended with Jesus's death.

The story of the Master and his slave, who expects the slave to get his supper ready before he sits down to eat himself, has one of the most difficult conclusions. Since we no longer live in a society with slaves or servants (for most of us) we may find it difficult to imagine how we might have reacted in the Master's position. We might suppose that we would have invited the slave to sit down with us at once. But that leaves unanswered the question of who would have made the supper, before any of us could eat; and whether the slave would have sat down with us at table anyway. I vividly remember staying with an Indian family in Chennai twenty-five years ago while representing the URC at the Jubilee of the Church of South India, when to my great embarrassment the wife of the family refused to sit with us after serving our meal, whereas the teenage daughter did sit down, so that she could improve her English by talking

to me. The wife never did sit down with me at any meal I had during my stay; and I began to appreciate the deeply-rooted nature of social customs in different countries.

The basic point that Jesus is making is simply this: we should not expect God to reward us for doing our duty. I find this both a humbling and encouraging message for us in our Jubilee year as a Church. No one can deny that things have turned out as expected or hoped for by those who led the movement towards union between 1963 and 1972. Most strikingly, our present size is smaller than that of the PCE in 1972; ministers are much more stretched; single-church pastorates are virtually extinct in many Provinces, including our own, putting greater pressure on lay preachers; evening services have virtually disappeared (though they were only an 18th-century innovation anyway); youth and children's work has declined even more than wider church membership. Most of this has passed without any sense that all these points hang together, nor that we share these problems with most other Churches in the country, including now some Pentecostal and Community churches, and indeed the wider world, including the USA. We have tended to look at them as though they are unique to us; even though Congregationalism was in decline for almost the whole of the 20th century (as I have written elsewhere).

This is a sharp reminder of how memory works, and how we can use it, or not, as the case may be. Memory is important for a sense of who we are and where we have come from. So it is important that our memories are as accurate as possible. But the purpose of memory is not constantly to be looking back; rather we should use it as a base to look forward, building on what has been achieved and taking care so far as we can not to repeat past mistakes.

I do not intend to analyse our history in a Sunday morning sermon; I did attempt something like that in my History Society Annual Lecture earlier this year, which will be published soon. What I do want to comment on is the fact that some writers have suggested that all that has happened since was a consequence of our union. With respect, I believe this is rubbish; and here Jesus's words in our Gospel reading are highly relevant. It was right to unite, because the New Testament makes it clear that God in the person of Jesus fervently desired that after his death his disciples should be (or remain) one. The same point is echoed time and again in Paul's letters to the infant churches around the eastern Mediterranean. Like the slave in our Gospel, in uniting we did our duty; we are not responsible for the fact that the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Baptists and others did not join us, or develop further forms of church which could contain us all – an objective desired by some of us, past and present, since the end of the Commonwealth in 1660.

Nor do I believe that it will never happen, though one should never under-estimate the power of sin. Read C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* if you doubt that. The difficulties which our own two former congregations have gone through in coming together are as nothing, compared with those in cementing the union of 1972 in the following decade; and most of our difficulties have really been over trivial details – not unlike whether you put the milk in first before pouring the tea, or the other way round. The latter may have been the way it was done in China or India; but that does not mean that we have to do the same.

In fact, the changes in the ecumenical climate in this country in the last century have been profound, and greater than any others since 1660. For example, in the 1920s it was routinely forbidden for nonconformists to lead a prayer in the Church of England, let alone preach. Since 1945 both of these have been routine, and since the 1960s it has been possible for nonconformist ministers (and laity from all churches) to become ecumenical canons of cathedrals, as I am of Ely Cathedral, though I do not use that title in the URC. If this has all happened in a hundred years, what can still happen in the next century? There is certainly a long way still to go. For example, why do we worry so much about 'our identity' (as increasingly we have tended to do as a Church since the mid-1980s), and why do we tend immediately to define that in terms of how we are *different* from others, rather than the same? I was taught at school that if two things were identical, they were the same? When did identity come to mean difference? Might that tell us something about declining enthusiasm for unity?

The depressing thing about this is that, when I am at international church gatherings, I realise how advanced England is ecumenically compared with most other countries in the world. 'Doing our duty' is not something to be ashamed of, but rather to be celebrated. So although few in 1972 ever expected to be marking fifty years of the URC, because it would have become part of larger united Church long since, I believe we can celebrate (quietly and modestly) this jubilee, whilst recognising that much still remains to be done before we can truly be said 'to have done our duty'.