



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden

Readings: Matthew 11.25-30; Zechariah 9.9-12;

You may have noticed that, for today's Welcome and Introduction, I stood by the font. I wanted to remind us of our baptism, 'which concerns our relationship to God, to the church and to one another'.¹ Baptism into Christ signifies the new life he offers as we are saved, freed, shaped and equipped by him. And that is something for us to celebrate, in grateful worship and contemplation. As George Herbert sensed God saying: "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat." So I did sit and eat.'²

There are also other ways for us to respond to God's goodness. As Herbert's muse had earlier said, when gratefully responding to Love's welcome:

'My dear, I will serve.'

The muse wasn't wrong about serving. It is indeed part of life in Christ; it's just that it isn't the whole of it. Service without worship omits the essential realisation that we *can* only love 'because God first loved us.'

The service we offer as widely diverse followers of Jesus Christ will take many forms. Let me offer just some examples in alphabetical order, lest I suggest any is more important than another: administration, community work, healing, pastoral care, preaching, teaching. There's cleaning, too; let's not forget the cleaning. As Herbert elsewhere says:

'who sweeps the room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine'.³

Another ministry for disciples to offer is the eldership to which today we ordain Carys Lee, and it is of this that I wish to speak today.

Essentially, as with any other ministers, elders are first and finally disciples of Jesus.⁴ As sealed in baptism, disciples gain both their identity and their lifestyle from being in Christ; Christ models for us the life to which God calls us. Wondering what it *is* about Christ that we are to emulate, we might do worse than look to Zechariah. I don't suppose we often associate the passage Tim just read with eldership, but maybe it is of more relevance than at first meets the eye.

If the Gospels are to be believed, there's an implication that Jesus may have gained some of his self-understanding from passages like this one. After all, in Matthew's Gospel these very

¹ Thompson, David M. 2005 *Baptism, Church and Society in Modern Britain: from the Evangelical Revival to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* Milton Keynes: Paternoster page xiii

² George Herbert – Love bade me welcome

³ George Herbert – Teach me, my God and king

⁴ Newbigin, Lesslie 1989 *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* London: SPCK page 241

words are cited in reporting Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. It's as if he is inspired to be a king like the king in Zechariah 9. So, what sort of king is that?

Well, in truth, Zechariah 9 is a complex passage, and time does not allow us to explore it fully. Here, though, are words about God's radically inclusive goodwill. The prophet has a surprise for Judah: *other nations* are going to be brought within God's covenant. Had we read a few of chapter 9's earlier verses, we would have heard that even the Philistines - once Judah's arch enemies (think David and Goliath - I Samuel 17) - will become like a clan of Judah. As somebody once said, 'If there is hope for the Philistines, there is hope for all.'⁵ Zechariah 9.9 imagines a new king who is God's instrument for bringing these nations not under an invading state's control, but within God's covenant of steadfast loving kindness. In the prophet's mind's eye this King arrives in Jerusalem, and is characterised as saved, victorious, humble and righteous.

It seems he is **saved** in that he receives divine help for what he undertakes in God's name. He is **victorious**, not because he has zapped Judah's enemies, but because he has achieved God's desire of drawing previously hostile nations closer to the Lord. (9.9b)

He is **humble** because he rides not the horse of a military leader, but the donkey of one humbly serving God's will. (9.9c)

And this king is **righteous**, not in the sense of gaining moral perfection, but because he lives out that covenant relationship with God by ruling righteously as he pursues peace, destroying every implement of war. (9.10)

Saved, victorious, humble and righteous. Quite a vision of kingship. And as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem (Matthew 21.5) for the dénouement of his three-year ministry, perhaps we can see why people's imagination took them back a few centuries to these closing chapters of Zechariah. This Jesus is like that new King Zechariah spoke of - saved, victorious, humble and righteous.

Saved by his unity with the God who sent him to draw all things to Godself.

Victorious because he is indeed the instrument of God's reconciling intention.

Humble in that, born to a donkey-riding woman, and entering Jerusalem on one himself, he models not being served but serving.

And Jesus is **righteous** because in his living, dying and rising he embodies the covenant, dying that we might live.

So back to eldership. If it is a role in which we're inspired by Christ's life and work, might the king who inspired him also inspire us?

In eldership, it's not that we are perfect for the job and hit the ground running, but that we're **saved**, as the king and Jesus were, by God's presence and work in us. That's why, as elders, our ironic starting point is to stop, in order that we might contemplate and accept Christ's invitation: 'come to me and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and learn from me.' We can't do this eldership thing of ourselves; it's God's work in us, and we are invited to give God space and opportunity to do it.

Elders are **victorious**, too. It's not because we trample over those around us, less still wage battle with them, but that because, as II Corinthians has it, our vocation is that ministry of

⁵ Mason, R. 1977 *The Books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* Cambridge: CUP page 87

reconciliation whereby God uses us for drawing things together in the congregation, holding them together in creative tension and fruitfulness.

Elders are also like their Lord and that imaginary King in their **humble** servanthood. Their motive is to reflect something of Christ's desire for people's wholeness, as they take their place in leading the church's life of worshipping God and helping others to do so, of caring for the fellowship, of working in the community, and at the moment discerning our way through these days that corona virus is re-shaping. Whatismore, we show we've truly cracked servanthood when we know how to let others serve us, too. Is it not a serious misunderstanding of servanthood, if we want all the opportunities to make others feel grateful for us, but never let them make us feel thankful for their kindness, too?

And lastly, elders find their type in Jesus as **righteous**. I've not been burdened with too many of them, and with none here, but I have struggled with elders who believe themselves to be God's gift to the church. That's not our vocation – we're not to be omniscient and indispensable. Our righteousness is to be found in answering God's covenant with ours – our covenant with God and with each other – our covenant of durable trust in God, of reliable interdependence with each other and of consistently generous spirit towards all.

I've never been an elder in the sense that many of you are, or have been, but I am profoundly grateful for all those who are, and for the one who soon will be.

May God bless you all, and inspired by Christ's example, so may your baptism bear fruit, to the glory of God.