



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 6 September 2020

Readings: Matthew 18.15-20; Exodus 12.1-14; Romans 13.8-14

Last time I conducted worship with you, amongst other prayers, I used some from the writings of John Hunter, a nineteenth century Scottish Congregationalist. On that occasion I used prayers from his 1880 classic, *Devotional Services for Public Worship*.

Preparing that service reminded me that he was the originator of an invitation to the Lord's Supper that I sense remains beloved today. It includes the words, 'Come to this sacred table, not because you must but because you may.' In what Dr Hunter calls *Address by Minister to the people*, he implies that our participation in the sacrament is a choice that we make as the result of an invitation that God issues. In essence, we are beckoned forward to this place, that we might 'let the bread and wine be to us the witnesses and signs of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.'¹

That is an important choice for us to make at the start of the new school year, and as I recommence full time ministry amongst you following the two years in a denominational role that took me away from Cambridge a great deal. Not because we must but because we may, there are various situations in which we are invited to choose God's way. Our readings today suggest three.

First, in the book Exodus, the people are invited to identify with the Lord. Those who do so will be exempted or 'passed over', when the Lord is singling out the people of Egypt because they held the Israelites in captivity. We may well balk at a God who brutally punishes people, but for today, the inference I am emphasising is God's longing for us to associate with God's Word, God's work and God's way. We know what it is to identify with a football team – so we wear a Chelsea scarf – I know the Blues have at least one supporter amongst us! Similarly, we might sport our college scarf, to show our university allegiance. How do we show that God has our allegiance? Few of us take the blood of a lamb – sheep's or goat's - and paint it onto the two doorposts and the lintel of our houses. Maybe the most obvious signs that we are the Lord's are our Sunday church going and our kindly works doing. Either without the other is less than the Scriptures urge upon us. The Christian's core vocation is to love the God who is the ground of our being, and to love the neighbour who so frequently is a stranger. Answering that vocation can be summed up in the decision to be a follower of Christ. We might begin that as another follower's hanger on, but as we read the Bible it is clear that eventually Jesus' invitation to people is direct: 'follow me'. Identifying with Jesus and his way is a choice. We do it, not because we must but because we may. Coming to this table though, does the love of God in Christ, intimated in bread and wine that bespeak his dying and his being raised for the sake of the world, not make the choice to identify with the Lord by following Christ all the more enticing?

Secondly, in the Gospel reading, we are offered a careful process for attending to disputes amongst one another. For Matthew, the context is a dispute within the Christian community, though I dare to believe that Jesus' teaching holds as good for relationships outside Christian fellowships as it does for those within it. The strategy for two people who fall out – Matthew

¹ Hunter, John 8th edition 1903 *Devotional Services for Public Worship* London: J. M. Dent page 143

talks of one person sinning against another – is a sequence of attempts at reconciliation. First, the two are urged to resolve it one to one. If that fails, then take someone else along – it seems to be suggestive of an independent mediator who might oil the wheels of compromise. And if that fails, ask the church for help – maybe a couple of elders, known for their sagacity and insight. What I find here is less an exact blueprint from which we today should not depart, and rather a suggestion that pursuing reconciliation may take time, carefulness and persistence. If at first you don't succeed ... Of course, when we fall out it is perfectly possible to let it fester, and eat away at us until it threatens our equilibrium, pulling down our mental and even physical health, but we don't have to. Working at reconciliation is the other choice we can make – not because we must but because we may. Coming to this table, though, does the restoration God holds out by the Son, and intimated in broken bread and poured out wine, not make the choice to strive for reconciliation with one another compelling?

And then there is the bottom line of day to day discipleship, as Paul sums it up to the Romans: 'owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.' It sounds as if this is the pinnacle of what Paul regards as walking in the light. I was especially stopped in my tracks by that line, 'love does no wrong to a neighbour'. Doing wrong here could be understood as 'being ill disposed' to one's neighbour. So we might think love of neighbour is precisely the opposite of being ill-disposed towards them - that is, being committed to our neighbour's well-being. That's a proactive thing, which by definition is a choice that we make. In whatever generation we live, we are faced with opportunities to pursue our neighbours' well-being. I remember when that was about going out of our way to walk with people living with HIV-AIDS. Indeed, that was when I learned the reality for many a same sex loving person, that they would rather be hated for what they are than love for what they are not. And I remember, too, when pursuing a neighbour's well-being was about quite literally caring for the person next door who gradually lived more and more with the impact of dementia. I speak not of myself, but of the moving ministry of one of our neighbours in West Chesterton for another opposite her. She could, of course, have chosen to ignore that neighbour. But no; she was in and out of that house several times a day. Love of neighbour is a choice we make – not because we must but because we may. Coming to this table, though, for me at least betokens the One who first loved us and because of whose love we are inspired to love.

Identify with the Lord; seek reconciliation; love your neighbour.

The world that is in some ways rendered unrecognisable by the coronavirus pandemic holds out such choices for us, arguably as much as ever before. So, of course, does a world where all sorts of other things rob people of peace, prosperity or plenty. Knowing that we *may* make the choice to identify with God's way, to work for reconciliation and to love the neighbour who may well be a stranger doesn't always mean that we feel we must. But coming to this table is about encountering the One who, when faced with the choice *did* entertain going his own way, but then felt the irresistible pull, 'not my will, but thine be done'.

As we come again to take bread and wine, remember again what P. T. Forsyth urges us 'The great thing is not to be sure that something *was* done, but to have part and lot in doing it, to have it done in our soul, to be doing it with Christ, with him to die and with him continually to rise.' So, therefore, let us come, not because we must, but because we may, and will be transformed for doing so, until unavoidably we love as he loved us.

Let it be so. Amen