

'Love the Lord your God...love your neighbour as yourself' *Matt 22. 37, 40*

'The body is one and has many members' *I Cor 12.12*

'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile' *Jeremiah 29. 7*

Churches across the Diocese of York are thinking in these Sundays before Lent about the ways in which churches grow. We are doing this because it's important to understand that as churches in the diocese we are not simply a collection of individual corner shops, nor are we a supermarket chain: we are an interlinked series of expressions of the global and national church working at local level. We need each other and we are part of each other, and we should do all that we can to help the church – all churches – grow.

So, along with other churches across the Diocese we've thought in the last two weeks about growing in our discipleship – Christlikeness – and in our Commitment – applying our inner beliefs to our words and actions. Though, of course, it is impossible to be a disciple without being in the company of others, and it is impossible to express our faith except in relationship to others, it can still seem on the surface that discipleship and commitment are personal things – things that we do and that we have control over. But the church knows nothing of the individual Christian, only the Christian in relationship to others. The New Testament never refers to saints as individuals – they are always plural. The deepest truth of all is that Christians together are more than the sum of their parts.

Our three readings explore this in different ways, and all of them are vital as we look to God for inspiration and for example about how we grow and develop as churches. There is, of course, an underlying truth: the gift of God in creation is that human beings need each other. It is not good that we are alone. Think of all the great 'and's in human life – the people who would not have been half as effective if they did not have an 'and'. Morecambe and...Tom and...Torville and...Tate and...Fish and... Human beings are designed to collaborate. Even a stand up solo comic needs an audience. And lest you think that a hermit – perhaps the most extreme form of monk, is the exception that proves the rule, the hermits I know about have an enormous group of friends and collaborators – it's just that their friendship and their ministry is expressed more virtually than physically. We are designed for partnership.

So it is that Jesus, when asked to sum up all the law, all the teaching of God about how we live our lives, cannot separate love for God with love for human beings. The command to love your neighbour as yourself can sound so glib and so easy to say and do, but it is at the heart of everything we are and everything we do. You wouldn't think so, sometimes, when you hear those politicians who talk only about competing and winning and succeeding – all of which also means that some people will lose and fail. And you might not think so when anxious shoppers compete for the best bargain in the sales, or drivers cut each other up or vie for the last parking space. But we are designed for cooperation and collaboration. Perhaps the most over used word in the English language at the moment is 'community', but the fact that it does get used to describe everything points to the reality that we do better when we collaborate rather than compete. And that starts with loving and valuing our neighbour – whoever that may be.

Wouldn't it be good if that was absolutely exemplified here, in church? Wouldn't it be great if we instinctively recognised the image of God in the people we sit next to, see Christ and serve Christ in our fellow worshippers. That's what Paul asks of the church at Corinth. Think of yourselves as a body, with different parts all joining together to act as one seamless whole. And you can see how that might work, when you realise how many different gifts all come together when we worship, all the different ministries which join together to ensure that together we can worship God week by week. But the fact that Paul has to spell it out is telling. The church he wrote to was split in all sorts of ways, and most churches are. It will be our commitment to overcoming divisions, to being reconciled, to accepting and working with difference, that will make us a true community. Sometimes tensions can be creative, and discovering them will be the essence of working in Partnership. But bearing a grudge, and not making the first move towards reconciliation will disable the Gospel. Partnership and the sharing of gifts requires work, and grace.

Our connections, our partnerships, cannot be confined within the walls of a single church. When you think about it it's impossible to define the boundaries of this church. We are all connected to other Christians in other places, and the request in the Vision Process that we should first sort out our pastoral care among ourselves before spreading it out to the community was, I thought, very difficult to carry out, because I don't know exactly who we are. All sorts of people and organisations are a part of our life, even if Sunday by Sunday a good number don't worship. That's not meant to downplay the importance of caring for one another, but it is meant to illustrate that our connections are many and complex. Partnership means exploring who we are and who we know and how we benefit each other.

Not only does that mean we have to take our relationships with other churches and denominations seriously – as Rural Dean I'm discovering that on a daily basis, especially as we continue to spread fewer clergy over the same number of churches, and collaboration is the only way to survive, and Churches Together in Beverley continues to work on proclaiming the Gospel together rather than apart – not just is this about other denominations, but other groups too, not all of them Christian and some avowedly not. Jeremiah, writing to the Jews who had to discover what it was to live out their faith in a strange city into which they had been taken unwillingly, said that they should seek that city's welfare. I think that's an amazing statement. Don't agitate to escape. Live, prosper, and work in partnership with people you might consider your enemies.

I wouldn't describe Beverley Town Council as the Babylonians, taking us captive, but the point is clear. There are those who, while not proclaiming a Christian basis for their actions, work for the good of our society in ways we would recognise as revealing the values of the Kingdom of God. We speak about this in our Vision Statement: there will be some things we do which are distinctively Christian, and we will work with other organisations which are for the good of our society. Sometimes that gets you into trouble and tension – think about 'Lobstergate' – but Partnership means discovering limits, working with tension, and finding the Kingdom of God in unexpected places.

May we love our neighbours, discover our gifts, work as one body, find God in our fellow Christians, and discover Christ in our wider community, that we may work together, and working together seek the welfare of all, to the glory of God now and forever. Amen.