

A Sermon for an Annual Parochial Church Meeting  
Easter 2: Exodus 14 vv 10-31, Acts 4 vv 32-35, John 20 vv 19-31.

Next Saturday morning at 10.00 in the Church Hall we have our Annual Parochial Church Meeting and Vestry meeting in which we choose our churchwardens, sidesmen and Parochial Church Council members, hear reports on our PCC's stewardship over the last year and perhaps discuss our policies and strategies for the future. It is not inappropriate that we do this at Easter when we are celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. We are the Body of Christ. One with Him, one with one another, we share in Him God's mission to the whole world.

The Church holds an annual meeting. So do many other organisations: social clubs and voluntary societies, parish councils and limited companies. We can learn a lot from our experience of these annual meetings, but we must beware of copying them. The Church is not a social club, a voluntary society, an organ of government or a business. The Church is the people of God.

Social clubs mainly exist for the benefit of their own members. Hopefully, the members are all friends with one another. The club is likely to depend heavily for its success on the work of volunteers. In those last two respects, the Church is very much like a social club. Jesus calls us His friends and hopefully we are friends with one another. The Church also depends very much on volunteers. The word "voluntary" comes from the Latin word for "to will." Our wills are to be conformed to Christ's Will so that we willingly get on with doing God's work in the world.

One difference I notice between the Church and a lot of social clubs is that we are much less effusive in thanking our volunteers for what they do. We like to express our appreciation, but we know that their true motivation in working for the Church is that they love God and we would not want to insult them by implying that they are looking for human praise or approval.

A great contrast between the Church and a social club, is that we emphatically do not exist primarily for our own benefit. We exist, as a Church, to the glory of God. We exist to worship Him, to serve Him and to serve our fellows Christians and the people of the world. In doing so, we do ourselves a lot of good, but we do not support our local Church primarily for our own benefit. Paradoxically, if we try to do so, we are bound to fail. If a Church expends most of its energy on looking after itself, there is no point in its continued existence and we cannot expect God to sustain it – except as an act of mercy in the hope that such a misguided Church might repent.

Voluntary societies exist to achieve a particular aim: promoting sport, supporting the local hospital, raising money for poor countries overseas, whatever. Voluntary societies are good things and Christians will often belong to them and support them. But a Church is much more than a voluntary society. It is a living organism, the Body of Christ, breathing the Holy Spirit, a Temple for God the Father. People choose which voluntary societies they join. God chooses us to be part of His Church.

Politics is about involving the citizenry in government. We are a democracy. The δῆμος (demos), we the people, are responsible for own government. Democracy is not so much a mechanism for ensuring that the majority get what they want, as a device for involving as many people as possible in the attempt to decide what is right. We can learn a lot from the political process: the need for consultation, the need to follow proper procedures so that everybody gets a say, the importance of respecting the opposition, willingness to accept defeat, to live with decisions one did not agree with. There are, however, aspects of politics which have no place in the Church. Christians do not grab power. They are not self-important. They use leadership for the benefit of the whole community, not for themselves and their cronies. There is no place in the Church for spin or any other kind of misrepresentation. Christians do not gang up, form secretly alliances and generally subvert the process so that they get their own way while preserving the appearance of democratic decision making.

Business has a lot to teach us too: the proper management of staff and resources, the importance of efficient, open and honest systems of accounting. Business is, however, about profit. Now there is nothing wrong with profit so long as workers and customers are treated fairly and there is proper respect for the environment, but we work for a Boss who asked, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Profit is not a sufficient motive for a Christian. In fact it misses the point. Again to quote the Boss, “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” Money must come high on a business’s list of priorities. However noble the business, it cannot survive without money. To the Church, however, money is simply a means to an end. It is never a priority. As we have already seen, obsession with our own survival as a Church, is the surest route to extinction. We survive doing God’s work or we sacrifice ourselves in order to accomplish God’s work and look forward to the Resurrection, but, unless we do God’s work, there is no point in our existence.

So, if the Church is not a social club, a voluntary society, a political organisation or a business, what is the Church? Like the Israelites in the Old Testament lesson, we are a redeemed people, marching towards the Promised Land in the company of our God. Like the apostles in the Gospel, we are witnesses of the Resurrection, empowered by the Holy Spirit to complete the mission God gave Jesus. We are in succession to those converts in the early chapters of the Book of Acts, who formed a sharing, loving community, attentive to God’s Word, united in prayer and the breaking of bread and bearing witness to the world. That is what a Church is.

So, what should our meetings be like? I suggest that all our decision making should be carried out in a prayerful atmosphere and with due attention to the Bible and to the Church’s teaching as well as an attentiveness to what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us now. The Spirit may speak to us directly or through other people or through circumstances. We should be aiming for consensus, rather than confrontation, and, where there are differences, we should continue to love one another. We can pray for our opponents - perhaps that they will see the light, perhaps that we will have the grace to recognise that they were right along.

A spiritual approach to decision making does not apply only to the obvious – to things like worship, evangelism and pastoral care. The spiritual should inform all our decision making – including what we do about buildings and money. We are seeking to please God, not ourselves and our discussions and our voting should be carried on in that light.

When we elect wardens and PCC members we are trying to find God's choice of people. Their task is to work with the Rector and the whole congregation to advance God's glory, to build His Church and to do God's work in the world. There is no place for politics in the sordid sense, for intrigue or favouritism. We are trying prayerfully to identify God's candidates and to cast our vote according to what we believe to be His Will. In the same light, we decide whether to stand for office. Do we believe God is calling us to be a churchwarden or to be on PCC? Are we offering because we believe that we can assist the Church in Cuxton and Halling to fulfil its God-given vocation?

What about those who are not churchwardens or PCC members, the rest of the laity? Well, we all have a role. We are all members of the Body of Christ. We each have gifts of the Holy Spirit according to the task that God has for each one of us to do. This means that we respect ourselves. We don't cultivate a false humility, feeling that we are not good enough. Christ makes us good enough. The question is what does He want each one of us to do? What should we say? Or should we forbear to speak? What should we do? How can we support others in their ministry? And don't underestimate the importance of a ministry of prayer.

If we accept that we are all members of the Body of Christ, we respect everybody at the meeting, everybody in the Church. If people wish to speak, we listen with respect. We do not interrupt, shout down or ignore people because we think they are less significant than we are or than certain other people are.

On the other hand, respect for other people means we have to be careful when we are speaking. We would not wish to bore people or patronise them. We should not speak too long. Other people might want to speak. People have things to do after the meeting. They do not want it unnecessarily dragged out. If we respect people, we respect that they have other things to do apart from listen to us. When we address the meeting, it is in order to communicate, not an expression of our own importance.

We have to respect the chair and the rules for procedure at meetings if everybody is to have a fair chance to speak and good decisions are to be made thoughtfully and prayerfully.

The Annual Meeting holds the PCC and the church officers to account. If we are a Christian community, however, we start by affirming their contribution. We thank them for what they do for the Church. We do not try to catch them out or make them look silly by finding questions they cannot answer or pointing out where they have made mistakes. If it is necessary to draw attention to a mistake (so that it can be corrected) we do so gently and as unobtrusively as possible. If we feel we have to question or criticise a course of action, we do so positively, fully appreciating the person's commitment and honestly seeking to help

them. We never ridicule or hector fellow members of the Body of Christ. There is no place for point-scoring or power plays.

The Rector normally chairs the meeting. In many ways, he is the leader of the local Christian community. But what does Christian leadership mean? It is not about displays of power and self-aggrandisement. It is about humble service. Christian leadership models itself on Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Seeing their Rector kneel before them, some people are tempted to kick him in the teeth, but that is not the Christian way. The clergy are called by God and given the appropriate gifts of the Holy Spirit to carry out their functions. Their leadership role should be treated with respect.

We are the Body of Christ in this place, but we are only part of that Body, which is the whole of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We may not agree about everything with our brothers and sisters in Eastern Orthodoxy, in the Roman Church, the Baptists, Methodists, Salvation Army etc, but we rejoice that we are all one in the Lord, part of a worldwide and heavenly fellowship. We rejoice that they too are partakers of the Holy Spirit and we respect the insights God has given them.

More specifically, the Parish of Cuxton and Halling is part of the Deanery of Strood and the Diocese of Rochester. We belong to the Church of England, which is a member of the Anglican Communion. We have a moral duty to conform to the faith and order of the denomination of the Christian Church to which we belong. It is a matter of family loyalty. We belong to the Church of England; the Church of England belongs to us. We do not go our own way in the Parish of Cuxton and Halling without thinking of our responsibilities towards the Christian family to which we belong.

We are the Body of Christ. Everything we do has to be done in that context. Obviously our worship is the basis of everything we do, the basis of everything we are. It is our membership of that spiritual Body which must determine how we behave in every area of our lives. In our annual meeting we can learn a lot from social clubs and voluntary societies, from politics and the world of commerce, but we must transcend the values of this passing age and make our meeting an expression of resurrection life, an experience which glorifies God, builds up His Church and reveals His Love to the world, because that is what we are called by God to do.