

Over the past three months, we have witnessed the death of several people who influenced our culture and our world. The death of a cultural icon like Terry Wogan is presently, the last in a long line of people who shaped us and our culture: Bill Guest of Gladys and the Pips, author Norman Mailer, jazz legend Allan Toussant, Natalie Cole and closer to home, Jackie Collins and who will not remember, Cilla Black.

The contrast this morning is vivid: we have lost many whom we have loved and connected with, and this morning we would have welcomed four, but we welcome three people into membership, all of whom we know and love. Looking back on 130+ years of our history as a Church, I came across several monthly records where, in one month 8 people were added into membership, another month, 12; the highest number I recall reading was 15 people being welcomed into membership in one month!

Churches have a tendency to count their blessings in numbers. As a result, we think a church with more people must be "better", has big buildings, can afford good pastors and a team of pastoral staff, is healthy and has good ministry, and so on. The reality is, many large churches are unable to effectively direct their resources to recognise, welcome and nurture the community of people God has entrusted to them.

We have worshipping with us today, members of one of the smallest churches I have ever known: Bayworth Baptist Chapel; they are faithful in their meetings, and faithful in their witness in the community in which they live; what they do, is the envy of many churches! Please don't stop doing what you do! You have introduced a new colour into church life: the colour GREEN!

Recently, I met with dear friends whom we have known for 40 years. She narrated how, several years ago, in their two-year search for a church several years ago, they attended every "well-known" church in the city. They entered in for worship and left after worship, and no one greeted them, asked their name, how they were or any form of greeting! They continued their search **UNTIL** they arrived at the church they now call home.

I was curious: What made the difference? On their first Sunday, she narrated how they were greeted at the door by someone who introduced them self, asked their names, wrote it on a sticky label to be stuck on their lapels, walked with them into the sanctuary **AND** sat with them during the service, as if it was the most natural thing for the person to do!

You would be forgiven if you think this did the trick. The person who greeted them at the door, phoned during the week, and along with another member of the church, met them for coffee, and informed them about the life and activities of the church. No pressure was exerted, but the two from the Church inquired if any might be of interest to them. The following Sunday, she introduced them to others by name. In the space of two months they met the whole church of 60-80 people, all of whom warmly welcomed them and engaged with them. **This church is not just a welcoming church, it is a church which welcomes people!**

It is comforting to know that the body of Christ on earth is not perfect; it is **being made** perfect. One of the matters about church life which is debated, talked about and misunderstood, is **church membership**. Among several views, some understand church membership as they would, club membership, which is all about rights and privileges; "*because I am a member, therefore I should have/enjoy...*". Others understand church membership as a gateway into heaven; turning up at the security gate of heaven with a credit-card size membership card embossed in gold with the name of the church, followed by their name, and the last line stamped with the most important three words, "Member since (year)", and swiping this card at the gate of Heaven to gain entrance! May sound comic, but you only need listen to some of the popular jokes about heaven to realise this is not far from popular belief!

Perhaps our starting point should be to clear our understanding of the word, *membership*. If the Church were a club or social society, membership would indeed be about terms and condition of our association, and defining the rights and privileges we derive through our association; but Church membership is not about *association*, which is a created relationship, imposed on everyone.

Church membership is, however, about **belonging** which is a natural relationship into which people are drawn.

Our natural relationship is with God, who created us with His hands and breathed into us, His life-giving spirit. In this sense, we belong to God! As society becomes increasingly post-Christian, exchanging Christian values on which society is built for more secular or non-Christian values, our world frowns upon the language of **belonging to someone** which we associate with excesses like bondage and slavery. Strangely, even though we resist the language of **belonging**, many of us see nothing wrong referring to **my/our children, my husband/wife!**

The Christian understanding of **Belonging**, however, is not about control or power exerted by one person over another. In the context of Church membership, God invites us to belong to His family; He does not force us, coerce us, or bully us into a relationship with Him. He gives the invitation to belong to His family, but leaves the choice, to accept or reject His unconditional, open invitation to belong to His family, to us.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father with confidence, *I have revealed You to those whom You entrusted to me, bringing them out from this world. They were Yours; you entrusted them to me and they have obeyed your Word.*

Belonging is central to our understanding of church membership: **we belong to God through Christ who has adopted us into the family of God as His sons and daughters.** We **are** the family of God. He is our Father, and His Son Jesus is our Christ gathers us as one body to worship God, preparing us for the day when we will be reunited with the Father, as His rightful daughters and sons.

Now let's take a look at what Jesus teaches about this family relationship. An impetuous religious teacher wanted to engage Jesus in dialogue. He started by addressing Jesus as *Teacher*, bringing Jesus down to his level. *Teacher*, he said. *Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?* (Mt 22:36). The question

was intended to trap Jesus into saying something which could be used against Him.

Before they could settle down to hear His response, Jesus quotes their scriptures back to them, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is first and greatest commandment.* Then, without missing a heartbeat Jesus carries on, *And ... there is a second commandment which is as important as the first, "Love your neighbour as you do yourself". All of the Law (618 commandments), and everything the prophets have taught over thousands of years, all hang on (rest on, are rooted in) these two commandments.*

We belong to the family of which God is Father. To "love God" with our entire being - heart, soul and mind, is to worship only Him, obey only Him, and live for Him alone. Another way of expressing this is, *We delight in our relationship with God as our Father, because of who He is!*

So, as we learn to respond to God's love for us, we also learn to relate with those around us; it is not the other way around, that loving others is way to love God. The most difficult part, is loving others with the same love **God has for each of them**, not the love God has for us. Should we use God's love for us as a measure, we might short-change others of God's real love, if we feel God does not love us as much as we think He should.

Jesus illustrates this in the parable we know as the Good Samaritan¹. A man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by thugs and left for dead, wounded and bleeding by the roadside, in full view of passers by. We won't unpack the parable as we don't have time and it may be a distraction from the central message, but suffice it to say, the wounded man lying on the roadside is a Jew, which makes it more poignant that a priest and a Levite, both Jews, pass him by on the other side of the road.

A Samaritan, who is despised by the Jews, is travelling the same road, sees the badly wounded man, stops and administers first aid, transports him to place of

¹ Luke 10

refuge, safety and help, and very generously offers to pay for all his expenses until he is well enough to continue his journey.

We are easily caught up in the pathos of the parable, the moving response of the Samaritan, and miss the main point.

Jesus narrated this parable in response to the question asked by the religious teacher, *Who is my neighbour?* When He had finished narrating the parable, Jesus asks the teacher, *And so, which of the three (priest, Levite or Samaritan) do **YOU** think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*

We are forgiven for thinking that the **victim** is the neighbour worthy of our love, but the parable is not about modelling good neighbourly behaviour or deeds.

To the person asking the question, Jesus is saying, *you are so focused on "works", all you can see is the kindness and compassion by the Samaritan towards **his** neighbour, and with gritted teeth, you muster a curt, "well done you horrible Samaritan"; but the story is not about the Samaritan loving **his** neighbour, the hapless, wounded Jew on the roadside. The story is about **YOU** and **YOUR** neighbour the Samaritan, whom you dislike, detest and hate. Do you love him as you do yourself? Do you love him with the love God has for Him?*

When we understand, we belong to God, that we are each a member of His family, and therefore all of us are related to each other through God the Father, we can appreciate church membership as **belonging**.

It may now be possible to understand Acts chapter 2. After Pentecost, when the church was in an uncontrollable upward spiral of growth, thousands professing to follow Jesus, because each one understood, Jesus was the long-awaited Saviour, we read this,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common. They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as

any had need. Day-by-day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day-by-day, those who were being saved.

Please don't go from here and tell people, "Kalyan said we are to sell our possessions and belongings and give it to the church!" This, I have not said!

What is described is not a church manual for us to follow literally, to sell our possessions and belongings and give it to the church. What we have in this popular text, is an example of people who experienced the love of God for themselves, responded to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, and loved their neighbours, as they would love themselves, by sharing with them, the proceeds of selling their treasured belongings and possessions. In **this historical narrative**, the people surrendered their possessions and belongings, items they cherished and loved, in order that others' needs were met.

They did this because, each of them was renewed in their understanding of an eternal truth, they **belonged** to God as a member of His family; all they were doing then, was looking after the members of their own family!

In a few moments, we will welcome into membership Prom, Beccy and Bob (Diane is sadly unable to be here at this time). We welcome them as members of God's family, with whom we are related through our Father in Heaven.

As we welcome them, a word of caution to us all:

1. Please do not place undue expectations on them. To **BE** the person God wants them (and us) to be, is more important than to **DO** things and seeking recognition within the Church.
2. We need to also heed caution, not to allow anything which will break the bond of family fellowship we enjoy, and to make every effort to preserve the closeness and warm fellowship we have enjoyed all these years.

In His final hours on earth, before His crucifixion, the Gospel writer John, remembers Jesus saying, *A new commandment I give you: Love one another.* It would be natural to interrupt and say, "This is not a new commandment!", but Jesus qualifies this in the next sentence. *As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* (13:35)

Church membership is about this: that we belong to the greatest and best family in the world, and we live by the standard of loving each of our neighbours, the way we love ourselves, and with the love God has for each of them.

AMEN.