

Archdeacon's charge 2019

It is good to see you here: thank you for coming. Above all, thank you for accepting the role of churchwarden for another year. In doing so you are, of course, committing to quite a lot of work, not least the administration which modern systems and new legislation seem to demand. But you are also stepping into a stream of tradition, in the sense that your role is one of the most ancient lay ministries in the church. I remember visiting the little shrine church of St Melangell in mid Wales, and looking up to a wonderful circular candelabra which caught my attention because it had on it my name: Robert Jones. He was, apparently, churchwarden there in the seventeenth century and had gifted the light.

So yours is an ancient and honoured role, representing people to priest, priest to people, church to parish, parish to church, and significant in that you are officers of the bishop. I find that sense of a stream of tradition really helpful, not least in lightening the burden of the present. Thankfully it doesn't all depend on me, and we belong to something far bigger. It gives, if you like, a sense of perspective on the present.

Which is what both Ezekiel and Paul in our two readings this evening are trying to do. The prophet Ezekiel writing in exile, away from the Promised Land, is given a vision of how things will be. He knows there is hardness of heart amongst the people God has chosen for his own. He knows there is good reason they have been scattered from their homeland and live in lonely exile. But he also knows that this is not the end of the story, certainly not the end of God's dealings with his people.

God doesn't give up on them and never will. 'I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.' What a wonderful picture he paints of a sort of divine heart transplant, which will warm up these frozen people and literally give them new heart. Sometimes we need that perspective, not least when we're dealing with grumpy people, or we ourselves are the grumpy ones, when we are so caught up in the business of running the church that we're tempted towards hard-heartedness.

Paul didn't half find them a frustrating lot in Corinth, having to write to them several times. He is berating them for their divisions, as it seems they have been lining themselves up in two camps, one for Apollos and one for him, Paul. I wonder what those divisions might look like in today's church, in your church, in our diocese? Paul will have none of this, and uses two analogies to drive home his point, pictures not lost on churchwardens, I would think.

The first is a garden or field – you might think churchyard. It's the bit just before our passage, but referred to in the opening line as the field. Who is responsible for its growth? Well, it was a team effort: Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. And his point? We are all God's servants, working together, and it is God who is the one who matters. So, he might say to the Corinthians, get over yourselves with your feuds and your wrangling for power. Remember what you represent: we are God's field.

The second is a picture dear to the hearts of all churchwardens. He goes on to talk about God's building. We know all about buildings, don't we? How much they cost to maintain, the delight of the quinquennial, persuading people to open and close them, the burden of them and the blessing they bring. Indeed, the building has been the subject of many of our conversations, which I've been having with you.

For you know that your building is important in a way beyond simply the upkeep of it. It stands for so much and for so many in the community, although the burden of its care often falls to a few. It is amazing to see how well our church buildings are kept, how much they are loved and how frequently they are visited. This is why we are so keen for you to leave your churches unlocked as much as you can, open and welcoming as God is open and welcoming. And many people have contributed to its construction and care. Each generation has chosen with care how to build on the foundation which is already there: we are much more imaginative and much less pious in the use to which we put our church buildings, and thank God for that.

Of course, Paul didn't have to bother with either church or churchyard, so he goes on to push the analogy a step further. So, says Paul, never forget that the true foundation, the real and lasting foundation, is not one which can be inspected by your architect. The true foundation is Christ himself.

We are, amazingly, are the building blocks. Just as St Peter writes about living stones, a wonderful description of the Christian, Paul says that 'you are God's temple' and that 'God's Spirit dwells in you.' This was a bold claim when everyone knew that Temple was a very important building in Jerusalem which stood for the presence of God in the midst of his people. Here in Corinth Paul says that temple is 'you'.

The 'you' he is talking about is a plural you, not a singular one. This is not him exhorting us to individual piety, though he has nothing against that. This is all part of his argument against the divisions in Corinth and the undermining party politics of church life. Because he sees us as building blocks of Christ's church, any division or lack of unity is abhorrent to him. 'So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.'

God is the one who matters. This is a timely reality check for those of us, you and me both, who spend so much of our time dealing with buildings, churchyards, money, and all the other stuff that comes our way. It is for God's sake. And, moreover, the people stuff we do – calming ruffled feathers, mediating between all sorts, is for God's sake too. You are 'to encourage the parishioners in the practice of true religion and to promote unity and peace among them'. Care of the living stones is as much part of the task as anything else we do.

In the conversations which I have been having with you during the visitation days of May, I have been speaking of some of the challenges facing us as a diocese at the moment. We are all well aware of the claims on our giving in maintaining our buildings and paying for our ministry. We will be looking once again at how many clergy we can afford to have, and there will be tough decisions ahead. I hope you know the cost already to those working for us from the diocesan office, and those being made redundant.

So we need to practise a generosity in terms of giving, and also a generosity of spirit through this time, remembering that the parishes to which we belong are building blocks of our larger diocese. What we are talking about

here is big, namely the mission and ministry of God's church throughout this part of Worcestershire, not just in our own parish.

As we do the work of running our church, we need to keep the perspective both Ezekiel and Paul give us, the bigger picture, if you like. And what better time to do it than this week when the whole Church, indeed beyond the Church of England, is taking part in the prayer initiative, initiated by the archbishops of Canterbury and York, called 'Thy kingdom come'.

In these days between the Ascension, when the Lord left us, his living stones, to get on with the business of being the Church, and Pentecost this coming Sunday, when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he sends to enable us to fulfil that calling, we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord's prayer. It is a prayer which, like the feast of the Ascension, firmly connects up heaven and earth: Our Father in heaven, your kingdom come on earth. It is a prayer which puts everything in perspective too.

On Sunday Bishop Graham licensed a priest. He challenged the new incumbent to pray the Lord's Prayer each day for a month somewhere different in his new parish. Perhaps we could all commit to doing that, praying the prayer which sees a glimpse of heaven in everyday events, and training ourselves to see that we are about God's business even when we're up to our eyes in church business.

In terms of us being God's temple, though, this licensing was all the more significant because that congregation doesn't have a building in which to worship at the moment. We met in the pub where they meet week by week to celebrate the Eucharist in the skittle alley. Having been licensed to the background noise of Sunday lunchtime drinkers, I then solemnly installed him on a bar-stool for the vicar's seat - heaven and earth colliding wonderfully.

Those people in that place are the parish church. Each of them is one of the building blocks with hearts of flesh rather than stone. You and I, says Paul, we are like that too, for we are God's temple, God's Spirit dwells in us: let us pray for grace to live up to our calling, that His kingdom may come here on earth as it is in heaven.