

## ***Belonging to God and Each Other***

### ***Prayer:***

Lord God, we thank you for calling us to become  
a branch in your vine, a limb on your body, with your way of love  
written onto our hearts.

Thank you for calling us into the company of those who trust in  
Christ, and seek to obey his will.

May your Spirit guide and strengthen us  
in mission and service to your world;  
for we are strangers no longer but pilgrims together on the way to  
your kingdom.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be  
pleasing in your sight,  
O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Some time ago, there was a television advert for Walls Sausages  
in which a man was seen trying to teach his dog to say the word  
'sausages'. Again and again he tried, but each time the dog would  
gruffly bark back 'Walls'. The aim of the advert was to leave those  
who saw it unable to think of 'sausages' without thinking of the  
company 'Walls', that is, for 'Walls' and 'Sausages' to become  
inseparably linked in their minds.

The notion of ‘covenant’ as used in the bible does something similar with the way we think about relationships. It encourages us to realise that our relationship with God and our relationship with each other is inseparably linked. You cannot truly think of loving God without loving others in God’s way, and you cannot *fully* grasp what it means to love others without the love of God being at the heart of it. As biblical scholars sometimes put it, the biblical vision of covenant has vertical and horizontal aspects which cannot be separated from one another. The idea of covenant relationships are central for both Jews and Christians, and they mean that a true relationship with God and a true relationship with others is not an either / or choice, it is a *both or neither* reality, because these two aspects of our lives *define* each other.

All three of the bible readings we have heard today make this point. The book of Jeremiah vividly describes how God’s chosen people constantly fail to live as faithful covenant partners with God, failures which by rights should have torn apart their relationship with God. But then in the most extraordinary of plot twists, God announces, “the days are definitely coming when I will make a *new* covenant ... *even though* they broke the covenant we had before.” So Jeremiah lays bare the most vital thing about our relationship with God, which is that it only exists at all because of God’s limitless grace: God takes the initiative and stays committed to us in spite of our failings (that’s the vertical bit). But then what will God do to secure this undeserved covenant relationship with us? God will write God’s law upon our hearts. That is a poetic way of saying that the ten commandments will become something that we live out instinctively (that’s the horizontal bit).

There will come a time, God says, when your relationship with me will flourish *because* you will no longer consider doing those things which damage your relationships with each other – murder, stealing, adultery, envy and the like. Our relationships with each other depend on God’s commitment to us all, and our relationship with God is real when our relationships with each other are set right.

So also John chapter 15: “I am the true vine” says Jesus, “abide in me and I will abide in you.” Many a sermon on this passage will have encouraged its listeners to stay in touch with Jesus in their own individual lives, through regular prayer, private study and meditation. And rightly so, because nurturing our personal spirituality is vital. But there is more to be said. For the branch that stays intimately connected with Jesus the true vine will keep the commandments, and in doing so bear the fruits of love: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” There is simply no such thing as a private relationship with God that can be cultivated apart from our public relationships with each other. Think sausages, think Walls: Truly love God, and you will love others as God in Jesus loves us all.

In John, the image is a vine with branches; in Romans Paul speaks of a body with various limbs. But the effect is much the same. These images are meant to help us recognise that each of us is an intrinsic part of a greater living thing. As Christians, each and every one of us has become connected to the living presence of Jesus in the world, in the deepest and most intimate sense. Each and every one of us *belongs* together as vital organs of Jesus today. Paul says, “For as

in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are *one* body in Christ, and we are members *of one another*.” Think sausages, think *Walls* – and if you really think you are a member of Christ’ body then you *must* think that as such you are members of each other. Otherwise you have not really grasped what belonging to Christ means at all.

Paul uses the same language to emphasise that all Christians *belong* to each other in this profoundly intimate way when he writes his first letter to the Corinthian Christians. But in 1 Corinthians he unpacks it a bit more by adding that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.” Our relationship with each other as fellow limbs of the body of Christ runs much deeper than that we happen to share the same core beliefs and might be helpful to each other from time to time.

Hand operated mechanical litter pickers are often a useful aid for picking things up off the floor, particularly if you have trouble bending over. But the relationship you have with it hardly compares to the one you have with your own arm. Even though they perform similar functions, one is a useful device you keep on hand until you need it, and the other is a part of your very person, bound to you by muscle and bone.

When as a young boy I broke my left arm, I could hardly just throw it away and get another that worked better, or even get a courtesy arm to use whilst my own was being repaired, like I can with the car. My damaged limb stayed with me, held by a plaster-cast and kept in a sling. And of course, the damage did not just affect

what my arm could do, it had an impact on my whole life. It meant weeks sitting on the bench beside the school football pitch, instead of actually playing alongside my friends. As I am left-handed, it meant the hand on my right arm had to go through the uncomfortable experience of learning to write, and the unfamiliar experience of holding a fork. It meant my brain had to figure out what I needed to do to have a shower with one arm out of action and needing to be kept dry. My left arm was the only limb that was actually broken. But it was my whole body that needed to make adjustments to accommodate my fragile arm.

Paul describes Christians as fellow limbs in the one body of Christ because he wants us to see each other in the same way: not as labour-saving devices that we engage with only when we think it suits us, but as limbs as intimately connected as muscle and bone connecting arms and legs to the torso. Paul wants us to recognise that when one limb is in need, it has an impact on us all (that our faith insists we cannot ignore). Christians in covenant relationship with God through Christ are called by that very relationship to act towards each other in ways that say, ‘your need is *our* need’, ‘your burdens are *our* burdens’, ‘what matters to you, matters to *all* of us.’ Because that is how deeply we are connected to each another in the one body of Christ. That is inseparably linked to the Covenant promise we are about to make, that “we no longer live for ourselves, but for God.”

There are times when working as churches together has clear and measurable benefits. Resources can be shared, the burden of time and energy committed to a particular project can be distributed

more widely, a bigger pool of volunteers can be drawn on and a wider range of skills deployed. But there are also times when trying to think and work ecumenically seems to be the very thing that slows us down. Doing justice to a wider range of perspectives and church traditions can make the process lengthier and the outcome less clear.

At such times, may the insight St Paul shares in Romans that we belong together as limbs in Christ's body guard us all against retreating into relationships limited to mutual convenience. Jesus is our risen and ascended Lord; his unstoppable Spirit is with us. So Christians are set free from the need to obsess about their status or future in the world. We are free to let our call to belong together have priority over conventional notions of efficiency. We are free to take the time to listen humbly and learn from the rich tapestry of experiences and opinions to be found in the diverse body of Christ. In doing so we will be better placed to experience that life-giving pruning that is vital if the branches of the Christ vine are to be truly fruitful. And we will share in a more profound way in the mission of God to the world. For Jesus said, "love one another as I have loved you," and he also said "by *this* everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."