**Sunday 19th September – Church Membership**

Welcome

Notices/family news (including prayer requests): discussion group on zoom tonight. Who would like to come to discussion group/Prayer meeting if they were at a convenient time? EBA week of prayer – information at the back if anyone wants to get involved.

How are you today? I hope you’re enjoying being back here, I’m certainly glad to see you. It’s great to be together, to worship God and hear his word. Let’s pray.

Lord, thank you for giving us this place, to worship. Thank you for giving us these people to worship with. Thank you that in these times you meet with us in a special way; especially in the communion time we will have later. Lord, would you bless us now I pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let us sing:

28 As we are gathered

1205 Come, now is the time

We continue today on our journey through life; we have been born, grown, learnt, been baptised – now we come to another milestone as Christians, and that is Church Membership.

I must point out that although I call them ‘milestones’, they are not necessarily in order. Some people don’t come to baptism and church membership until later in life, and that’s fine. Some ask for church membership before baptism, and in many churches (including this one) that is ok, although I’ll come later to why we prefer it the other way around.

I must also point out the distinction between the universal church, which consists of all Christians, of all times, everywhere, and the local church, which is in our case Laindon Baptist Church. The two overlap, of course – but I’ll tell you now, it is possible to be a Christian, to be part of the universal Church, *without being part of Laindon Baptist Church*. It’s true! There are Christians outside these walls!

It is also possible to come to Laindon Baptist Church without being a Christian. To come and enjoy the services without allowing Jesus to be Lord of your life. But to be a church *member*, we need to believe that you are a Christian. And there’s a reason for that.

It's not because we are trying to exclude people. We don’t demand a certain level of knowledge or ask that you sign up to a specific set of beliefs, and if you don’t you’re out. We ask that you are submitting yourself to Jesus. One sign of that is baptism, as we heard last week, and as I said earlier we would like people to have been baptised. For some people, that doesn’t work, for example if they have been baptised as infants and truly believe they should not be baptised again, and that can be worked out in a conversation. But the church would want to know that the person coming to membership has a living relationship with Jesus and tries to live according to his teaching.

Part of the reason for that is because in a Baptist Church it is the members of the church who make the decisions. Except it isn’t. The members of the church meet together to discern, to try to understand, what God wants them to do. If someone isn’t submitting to Jesus, they can lead the church instead to do what **they** want to do. Get a few non-Christians making decisions for the church and suddenly the church isn’t going in God’s direction any more!

But before we go too much further into me on my soap box, let’s ground ourselves again in Scripture. Scripture has no sense of Christians who are not part of a local church. When it speaks about the Church, it talks about Christians who are joining together in worship and obedience.

1 Cor 12:12-27

**12**Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. **13**For we were all baptised by[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+cor+12%3A12-27&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28648a)] one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **14**And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

**15**Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **16**And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **17**If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? **18**But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. **19**If they were all one part, where would the body be? **20**As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

**21**The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ **22**On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23**and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, **24**while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, **25**so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **26**If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

**27**Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Lord, would you bless your word to us, and speak to us through it. Open our hearts to hear and to know your will, in Jesus’ name.

111 For I’m building a people of power

43 Bind us together

We know our reading well, don’t we. I’m sure we have all heard it many times. But there are three points I want to make:

Firstly: For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Paul is challenging his readers here, and it should challenge us. He speaks about people who are different, who have been joined together. And that is a really important thing about church. In this place, people who are different, people who would never get together in ‘normal life’, who might even go out of their way to avoid each other, are joined together.

Let me ask you something – and please don’t shout out any names! Are there people in this church you’d rather not have to associate with? Again, I don’t expect an answer! Are there people here you would never be friends with outside of church? Are there people you have nothing in common with? It might surprise you to hear me say, I hope so! Part of becoming a church member is making a decision, a commitment, that you will be a part of the Body of Christ in this place, caring for the rest of the Body whether you like it or not. And that is a witness to the world, isn’t it? In a world where division and hatred are seen all around, for an older person to say of a younger person, “he is my brother”, for a poor person to say of a rich person, “she is my sister”, for a strict person to say of a liberal person, “they are my friend” – what a picture of God’s kingdom! Isaiah spoke of a time when “the wolf and the lamb will feed together” – I wonder if this is what he had in mind? The church provides a picture, a possibility of a world where differences do not divide, where enemies are loved and true equality is found.

But for some people, that is difficult to understand. So Paul breaks it down. And, like Jesus, he starts with the person in what is traditionally a ‘lower’ position. The slave, the Gentile. The person with nothing to offer. But he asks that they take responsibility for their own decisions, their own attitudes. This isn’t about others putting them down, it’s about them putting themselves down and refusing to take up their God-given roles.

Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

The inferiority complex! I can’t be a church member because I’m not like so-and-so. I’m not good enough, clever enough; I can’t stand up and speak; I haven’t got the time to help in Girls’ Brigade or the technical knowledge to work the computer; there is no place for me. I don’t belong here because I have nothing to offer.

Paul says, never mind what other people are doing. It’s not about what you can offer – you are still a part of the body. And he says, and I say, “We need you!”

We need you to join us in worship.

We need you to pray.

We need you to join with us in discerning Jesus’ will for his church.

You bring something unique, something special, something that no one else brings, even if you don’t think it is important. How do I know? Because God has brought you here. God has given you as a gift to this church; all he asks is that you take your place in it. If everyone is speaking, who is listening? If everyone is making the tea and coffee, who is drinking it? If everyone is outgoing and enthusiastic in welcome, who is allowing people space to be themselves? If everyone is happy, who is caring for the one who comes in grieving?

Being different, having nothing to offer, is no reason to write yourself off and not take up your part of the Body.

But there are others. Those with the power, those ‘superior’, those who know it all and can do it all. Paul says, don’t think too much of yourself. Don’t think you can do it all. Don’t think that the stuff you do is more important than the stuff other people do.

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’

I can take a service. But just because I’m the one up here doesn’t mean I don’t need others. I have been so blessed to have people behind me, people who will step in when I can’t manage, people who look after the music and the computer, people who pray – people who **come**! What would I be, standing up here preaching, without all you listening? What would Mike be, playing without anyone singing? One of the most disheartening things I’ve found about ministry is when you try to do something and nobody comes, nobody takes part.

I know people (they are not church members) who won’t do anything unless they can be in charge of it. That is not God’s way. We need each other. And the one who has least to offer is the one who gets the special treatment – that is God’s way. Care for the weak, the vulnerable, the poor. Give to those who can’t repay you. So when as a church we provide for those who seem to have nothing to contribute, we are acting as Jesus did. When we listen to those who are unheard, we are acting as Jesus did. When we say, as I say now, that **every** person is a valued part of the Body – that is church.

Let me be frank with you. There are a number of categories of people in this church (and, I expect, most churches) – and some that overlap between them.

There are some who are just beginning their spiritual journey, and are not yet in a place of being baptised or joining the membership – that’s ok. We are all on a journey.

There are some people who for many years have been Christians, and have been happy to come to services without the commitment of being church members. Happy to be involved, to do things for church – but without really fully giving themselves to the Body, and without really fully receiving our commitment to them either. To them I would say, please consider taking that step to membership.

There are some who are church members, but for whatever reason do not take part in church life. As parts of the Body, their paralysis affects other parts. Now I’m not trying to make anyone feel guilty if they can’t ‘do’ much, through ill health or other circumstances. If that’s the case, the rest of the body is here to support you. What I’m talking about is an attitude that it doesn’t matter. The foot says, “I’m not a hand – it’s only hands they need. No one will notice if I’m not there.” The fact is, we do notice. We notice because you are valued, because without your contribution there is something missing. If you can’t join in something, don’t – but do realise that your absence actually does mean something to the rest of the body.

And there are some who are ‘all in’. Fully committed to the Body of Christ, working hard. Burning themselves out, in some cases, keeping the body alive. Mike K will tell you that when he waited for his knee replacement, his other leg took the strain. But that causes trouble in itself. The answer to a body that isn’t functioning as it should isn’t for some parts to take on more and more – it is for all the parts to do what they can. But to those parts that are working hard I would say this: Firstly, thank you. But secondly, we can be tricked into putting our value in how much we do. Being ‘the person who does everything’ has a certain status and even power. But I challenge you to find me the passage in the Bible that tells us that status and power, or even independence, is good. Church is about **inter**dependence. You still need others, still need to value their contributions however small, still need to care for them and honour them. You are **parts** of the body, but you are not the whole body.

So my message to you today is this. If you are a church member, take your place in the Body. We can’t be church without you. Whether you have much to offer or whether you are in a season of receiving from others, we need you. Recognise your own value, and that of others. Care for the weak, support those who are failing, because the only body that is entirely healthy is the body that is healthy in **all** its parts.

We are going to move on in a moment to communion. But before we do, I just want to say a bit about Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in which he describes their communion practise. He writes the letter because they are **not** acting as a body. They are **not** recognising that they are all equal under Christ, because even in communion they separate into rich and poor, even in this shared meal some go hungry and some get drunk. Where is the unity? Where is the reconciliation between classes and nations and gender divides that is the mark of God’s church? Paul says, they are not recognising the body of Christ, because they are not recognising that the lowest ones amongst them are still a part of that body. And he says that in their division they are not worthy to eat and drink from the Lord’s table.

So as we close our sermon time and prepare ourselves for communion, let us pray. Let us consider our own attitudes to one another. Do we recognise each other as part of the body, to be loved and supported and cared for? Do we put others’ interests before our own? Do we recognise **ourselves** as part of the body of Christ, joined in commitment and love to one another?

Lord, we confess that we have not always been all we should be as members of your body. We confess those times when we have failed to take our part… when we have failed to care for each other… when we have felt superior and failed to value one another. We confess those times when we have allowed our differences to divide us. And Lord we ask for your forgiveness. Break down the barriers between us, and bind us together once again in bonds of love. In the name of Jesus who died for each one of us, to give us life, amen.

Let us build a house <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3Pb77ylz_Q>

They say, “you are what you eat.” And nowhere is this more true than in the church, where the Body of Christ eats from the Lord’s table.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

At the table at the Last Supper, he took the bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the death of Jesus for us, until he returns in glory.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we praise and thank you for your love shown to us in Jesus Christ. We thank you for his life and ministry, announcing the good news of the kingdom and demonstrating its power. We thank you for his sacrificial death on the cross for the redemption of the world, and for your raising him to life again, as a foretaste of the glory we shall share.

We give you thanks for this bread and wine, symbols of our world and signs of your transforming love. Send your Holy Spirit, we pray, that we may be renewed into the likeness of Jesus Christ and formed into his Body. This we pray in his name and for his sake. Amen.

As we come to share communion, this is open to anyone who believes and trusts in the Lord Jesus, and we remember as we join together that this meal is shared throughout the world and throughout the ages, in the great company of the Redeemed people of God, and we rejoice that together with them the Body of Christ is living and breathing, growing and working for his glory.

Jesus said, ‘This is my body which is for you; do this in memory of me.’ Take this bread in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.

In the same way, he took the cup after supper and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me.’ We retain the cup until everyone has been served and drink together as a sign of our unity.

Drink, then, remembering that Christ’s blood was shed for you, and be thankful.

Your death, O Lord, we commemorate. Your resurrection we confess. Your final coming we await. Glory be to you, O Christ.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that while we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

We continue in prayer as we bring to God those people and situations on our hearts.

Lord, parts of your body here in Laindon are suffering, and we bring them to you now and ask that you would bless them. We pray for healing for those who are sick… touch them and give them strength; teach us who are strong how to uphold them and carry them in their time of need. We pray for those who are grieving, may they know the comfort you give. We pray for those in difficulty, that their way may be cleared and your blessing be known in their lives.

Lord we pray for the people we love: for Sophie, for Kevin, for Hazel and her husband…, bring healing to them, and peace, and blessing.

Lord we pray for the communities and nations around us. We long for them to see and know you; to walk in your ways and do your will. Lord, make us a light and a blessing to those who cannot see. Bring peace in the conflict, strength in the weakness and hope in the darkness, Lord we pray.

And Lord we pray for your church throughout the world, that it may be healed of those things that trouble it; division, oppression, persecution, temptation. Lord bring wholeness and strength to your body for your glory. Amen.

1065 Thy hand, O God has guided

Grace

If you have been inspired to take up your part in the church, and want to get more involved, there is a list at the front and the back of the church of things you might like to sign up for!