**The Palace Beautiful**

Text: Hebrews 10:23-25

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 19:1-6; Hebrews 10:19-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 122, 139, 533, 356, 393, 531+532

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#6)

**Theme:** The church is an assembly of Christians who discern faith, stimulate and encourage one another.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters continue to assemble together to stimulate and encourage one another so that the church may be the Palace Beautiful of King Jesus.

**Introduction**

You may have seen images of Buckingham Palace. This royal Palace has 775 rooms, over 77,000 sqm of floor space and has an estimated value of almost $5 billion. A ‘palace’ is a large and impressive, highly decorated building forming the official residence of a ruler. Until her death, Buckingham Palace was the official residence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

John Bunyan in his autobiographical allegory of the Christian life, describes how Christian came to ‘The Palace Beautiful’ on his journey from The City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The purpose of The Palace Beautiful is described by the ‘porter’ whose name is Watchful. You might know that the English word ‘porter’ can mean ‘a person employed to carry luggage and other loads, especially in a railway station, airport, hotel or market’. Such porters are largely a feature of the past in most of the western world. A porter is also ‘*a person stationed at a door or gate to admit or assist those entering*’. This was Watchful’s role as the ‘porter’ at the Palace Beautiful. Watchful explains to Christian “*This house was built by the Lord of the Hill, and he built it for the relief and security of pilgrims*”. The Palace Beautiful belonged to the King, but was provided for the benefit of true Christians so that they might be refreshed on their journey.

What do you think that the Palace Beautiful represents? The local church. The writer to the Hebrews, that is to Jewish Christians who had been scattered largely by persecution – explains that ‘*Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son*’ (3:6a). He then reveals that ‘*we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope*’ (3:6b). The church, as the house of God, is not a building as such, it is ‘*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*’ (Ex 19:6), a ‘*composed of a community of Christian believers who are like ‘living stones being built up as a spiritual house*’ (1 Pet 2:5).

The church is the official residence of King Jesus on earth, she is truly a ‘Palace Beautiful’ when her people are faithful to their Sovereign Lord. What faithful works make the local church a beautiful oasis of refreshment, relief and security for pilgrims? We are going to see, largely from our text in Hebrews 10:23-25, that:

1. The church discerns
2. The church stimulates
3. The church assembles
4. **The church discerns (v23)**

Look with me at verse 23 where the writer to the Hebrews says, “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful”.* This ‘confession’ is a profession of faith in Christ who ‘*opened for us a new and living way through his flesh*’ that is through His completed work of sacrifice on the cross he has provided the way to God. The church is a community of those ‘*chosen for eternal life and united in true faith*’ – to use the words of HCLD21A54. HCLD21A55 helpfully states that ‘*believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts*’. It is therefore necessary for the church to discern whether or not a person truly has a ‘confession of hope in Christ’; whether or not their faith is genuine.

Now, we do need to be careful here. It is true that ultimately, only the Lord God infallibly knows the heart of people like you and me (ref. Ps 139:2,23-23-24). However, it is also true that faith is made evident in the visible actions of our lives and the audible words of our mouths. Jesus said ‘*you will recognise them by their fruits*’ (Matt 7:20).

The Church of England was the state church during John Bunyan’s life and was largely a formal institution where many people attended worship services merely out of tradition, social convention or just to engage in an external form of religion. At that time there were also ‘non-conformist’, independent churches, also called ‘free’ or ‘dissenting’ churches because they did not conform to the doctrines or practices of the established Church of England. John Bunyan became a member of an independent church congregation in Bedford.

Church records there show that Bunyan drew the house rules of the Palace Beautiful from his own local church. Those who desired to join the Bedford church had to wait outside till they were called in - having first been examined to see if they had clear evidence of God’s work of grace in their hearts. If their confession of faith and life showed that they truly trusted in Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Saviour, they were then invited to come to the next church meeting.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, after Christian arrives at the door of the Palace Beautiful, he is first questioned by the porter, Watchful, who asks: “*But how has it happened that you have arrived so late since the sun has already set?*” To which Christian replies: “*I ought to have been here sooner, but oh wretched man that I am! I overslept at the Shady Resting-place that is located on the side of the Hill Difficulty. Yet in spite of that I would have been here much sooner, except that as I slept I lost my scroll of certification and reached the top of the Hill without it. Then searching for it, I was dismayed to find it had gone; so I was forced, with heaviness of heart, to return to the place where I overslept; then on recovering it, I pressed forward once again and thus have come this far*”. It was clear that Christian had persevering faith despite personal setbacks. This was in contrast to the characters Timorous and Mistrust, who turned back before they reached the Palace Beautiful. They were afraid of the two chained lions between which the path to the Palace Beautiful lay.

Wisely however, Watchful calls for a second opinion. A dignified and beautiful damsel called ‘Discretion’ came from inside the Palace to the door. You may recall from the sermon on “The Interpreter’s House” that ‘damsel’ is an old English word for a young unmarried woman. ‘Discretion’ means ‘*the quality of behaving or speaking in such a way as to avoid causing offence or revealing confidential information*’. Discretion probed Christian further about his experiences along the way listening with empathetic tears of understanding. She then called for three more of the family of the Palace, ladies by the name of Prudence, Piety, and Charity. These names mean wisdom, spiritual devotion and love. After further investigation about his walk of faith so far, Christian is approved and welcomed into the house.

For John Bunyan, local church membership was a serious matter to be based on spiritual regeneration of the heart, not a mere affirmation of doctrine. Our church membership practice mirrors this Scriptural approach. Those who desire to join this local community of faith are first interviewed by the elders. These church leaders seek to discern whether a person understands the person and work of Christ and whether their lifestyle clearly demonstrates a desire to live a godly life. The elders are the spiritual watchmen’ over the local church (ref. 1 Pet 5:2-3).

In this church we have a number of visitors, some of whom attend worship here regularly. We are very thankful for your presence amongst us. We are **not** like the Palace Beautiful or Bunyan’s Bedford church in that we do not question people at the door before allowing them in! Our worship services are open to anyone who comes through the door. All are most welcome to come and hear the gospel. However, full church membership is **only** for believing Christians who in the words of our text ‘hold fast to a confession of hope’ in Jesus Christ alone.

Does this describe you? If you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour (as I am convinced many of you do), I encourage you, if you have not already done so, to seek membership of this local church. To start this process, simply approach one of the ‘porters’ here, that is the other elders, or me, the ‘teaching elder’. We desire that all who are pilgrims on the path to the Celestial City find a spiritual home in a local church where they will experience relief, refreshment and stimulation – which brings us to our second point.

1. **The church stimulates (v24)**

Look with me at verse 24 where the writer to the Hebrews says: “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works*”. The Greek word translated ‘stir up’ here literally means ‘to sharpen’. Figuratively it refers to the sharpening of one’s mind or inciting to action. The same idea is wisely revealed in Proverbs 27:17: “*Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another*”.

How do believers in a local church community like this ‘stir one another to love and good works’? By encouragement (which includes exhortation and comfort) and admonition. Our text does not focus on the admonition, so I will not do so in this sermon. However, I would refer you to a sermon I preached in the ‘one another’ series last year from Colossians 3:16a entitled ‘Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom’. In that message I noted that “*admonition is a form of directed personal counselling which seeks to help another person by providing guidance through warning, cautioning, reproving or exhorting*”.

Back to our text: the Greek word translated ‘encouragement’ in verse 25 literally means ‘*to call another person alongside yourself*’. It conveys the main idea of urging another person to take action. It includes comforting someone but always with the aim that they would be better equipped to meet some difficult situation with confidence and courage. Please do not miss what is obvious from our text here. This is **not** primarily the ministry of the Pastor or Elders, but of each one of the believers who together form the ‘Palace Beautiful’.

The ‘one another’ ministry of the local church is portrayed in The Pilgrim’s Progress as Christian sits down to eat and drink in fellowship with Discretion, Prudence, Piety, Charity and Watchful. Listen to how Piety initiates the spiritual table conversation as the food is being prepared: “*Come good Christian, since we have been so loving to you to receive you in our house this night, let us, if perhaps we may better ourselves thereby talk with you of all things that have happened to you in your pilgrimage*”. Far from being offended, Christian is glad to have opportunity to speak in detail about his journey of faith so far.

As they talk together, Charity asks if Christian has a family and why he did not bring them along. Bunyan writes “*Then Christian wept; and said Oh! How willing would I have done it, but they were all of them utterly adverse to my going on pilgrimage*”. Christian explains that repeatedly he had spoken of the need for his family to flee from the City of Destruction, but his wife was afraid of ‘losing this world’, and his children were given to the ‘foolish delights of youth’. Many of us in this church have unbelieving family members and it is sad for us to speak of them. Yet perhaps it is sadder still when hardly anybody ever asks about them; for they are always close to our hearts. Christian was comforted as he spoke of his difficulties, griefs and fears.

This wise and careful ministry of encouragement is one of the characteristics of the true church that makes her a ‘palace beautiful’. The Heidelberg Catechism helpfully reflects the teaching of Scripture in LD21, answer 55: “*Each member should consider it his duty to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members*”.

We should not understand from The Pilgrim’s Progress that John Bunyan was promoting female pastoral leadership in the church through the characters of Discretion, Prudence, Piety and Charity. He was embodying the Christian virtues of discretion, wisdom, spiritual devotion and love in female form. His imagery also mirrors the central role of women in the life of the church, which in turn reflects the important role of women in the ministry of Christ as revealed in the gospels.

This ministry of ‘holy stimulation’ of one another, stirring up one another to love and good works, encouraging one another, is essential for the beauty of this House of the Lord. It is one of the ways in which this palace is adorned. Who can you come alongside this week? Brothers and sisters, Christian pilgrims like you and me need one another, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The church assembles**

Look with me at verse 24 where the writer to the Hebrews says: “*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*”. The Greek word translated ‘meet together’ specifically describes a gathering together of people at some location. In their journey from Egypt, the land of their captivity and oppression, to Canaan, the promised land of freedom and blessing, Old Testament Israel assembled together regularly as God’s covenant people. In Acts 7:38, Stephen describes them as ‘*the congregation in the wilderness*’ using the Greek word ‘ecclesia’ that is usually translated ‘church’.

Meeting together as a gathered congregation is very much the essence of being a church. As human beings, God has not designed us to live alone, but for community together in relationship with one another. As pilgrims following Christ, the Lord knows our need for fellowship. In order to best sustain and grow our faith we all need the encouragement, exhortation, comfort and admonition of others along the way. John Wesley, the 18th century English theologian and evangelist once said, "*There is nothing more unchristian than a solitary Christian*."

In the Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian had so far been a lone believer for most of the time. In his hometown, The City of Destruction, he was mocked by some, threatened by others and there were also those who wanted to bring him back. Along the way he met unbelieving travellers like Pliable, Obstinate, Worldly Wiseman, Formalist, Hypocrisy, Timorous and Mistrust but wisely did not remain in their company. He also had relatively brief and blessed encounters with Evangelist, Help, Good-will, and Interpreter. Now, in the Palace Beautiful, this representation of a local church, Christian meets together with other believers for an extended time.

Discretion, Prudence, Piety, Charity and Watchful come alongside Christian and he is comforted, encouraged and strengthened for the journey ahead. Having rested in a large upper chamber called Peace with a window that opened towards the sin-rising, Christian was shown a study in which were kept ancient records. He was shown ‘*the pedigree of the Lord of the hill, that he was the Son of the Ancient of Day, and came by an eternal generation*’. The acts of the Lord were recorded and the names of many hundreds that He had taken into His service.

Then they showed him the armoury – the place where weapons are kept. John Bunyan himself had been a soldier in Cromwell’s army. He well understood the need of good weaponry in battle. In the Palace armoury Christian saw the equipment that the Lord provides for pilgrims; a sword, a shield, helmet, breastplate, all-prayer, and shoes that would never wear out. All these references to the spiritual armour of God as revealed in Ephesians 6:10-18. Christian would leave the Palace Beautiful equipped with this military attire in preparation for the battles ahead. Soon he would come to the Valley of Humiliation where he would face the fearsome foe Apollyon.

Christian was also taken to the top of the Palace from where he could see in the distance the Delectable Mountains. The word ‘delectable’ means highly pleasing, delightful or extremely attractive. Christian saw from afar “Immanuel’s Land” – ‘*a most pleasant mountainous country, beautified with woods, vineyards, fruits of all sorts, flowers, springs and fountains*’.

To summarise, Christian experienced rest and refreshment in the Palace Beautiful. He enjoyed deep fellowship and engaged in godly, uplifting, encouraging and instructive conversation with fellow believers. He was equipped for the challenges of his journey ahead. He saw, in the distance, the glorious destination towards which he was heading. These things are the essence of the true and faithful church, as revealed in Scripture.

Brothers and sisters, we should not neglect, forsake, leave behind meeting together as a gathered church. Yet sometimes people like you and I do just this: we neglect to meet together on the Lord’s Day. Why is that? There can be many reasons including: On occasion, we may be sick or away from home; We may regularly be too tired from our activities during the rest of the week; We may sometimes prefer to be involved in other pursuits on the Lord’s Day; We may at times be so discouraged, sad or hurt in our Christian walk that we don’t feel like meeting together with others.

What can we say to all this from God’s Word? Meeting together as a church regularly is vital for sustaining a strong steady walk with the Lord as we journey towards our final destination. We all need to be regularly encouraged, exhorted, comforted and at times admonished – that is warned about the dangers that may face us. We all need to be regularly equipped for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12). We all need the help of one another to put on the whole armour of God so that we may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph 4:11). We all need to study together the ancient records in Scripture of the Lord’s great works in the past. We all need to see again together, from a distance, by faith, the glorious land that the Lord has promised will one day be our eternal home.

Just as it is wise and important to develop good physical habits for healthy living: regular wholesome meals, sleep and exercise, so, it is wise and even more important to develop good spiritual habits for our pilgrimage in Christ (ref. 1 Tim 4:8): especially regularly meeting together. Once we have learned to discipline ourselves to come regularly to congregational worship and to prioritise this so that our other activities are adjusted to fit around the Lord’s Day, then we form spiritually healthy habits.

There was a minister in our churches many years ago who came to a new congregation, and he saw that the numbers of people in the afternoon service was very low compared to the morning. He challenged the church saying that he had taken the call to preach God’s Word each week and that he laboured hard to prepare two Biblical, upbuilding, spiritually nutritious sermons. He was discouraged that so many were absent when the congregation met together a second time in the afternoon each Sunday. Can you understand how he felt, together with those who did come to the afternoon worship service and saw the empty pews around them?

Imagine how Watchful, Discretion, Prudence, Piety, and Charity might have felt if Christian had declined their invitation to stay with them for a second day, or if he had just stayed in his room rather than joining in fellowship with them. The church, The Palace Beautiful, is a delightful place to be when we, brothers and sisters, engage in the very activities that John Bunyan recounts in the Pilgrim’s Progress:

* Being willing to be questioned about our faith and life by the elders so that we can become communicant members of the church.
* Meeting together regularly for our worship services, as well as in Bible study and fellowship groups
* Being mindful in our conversations to speak often about our Lord, His Work and His Word. Being willing to talk openly about our joys, and sorrows, spiritual gains and losses as we come along side one another.
* Encouraging, exhorting, comforting and admonishing one another for our mutual spiritual benefit.
* Pointing one another forwards towards our final destination; our eternal home with Christ in the New Heavens and New Earth.

Buckingham Palace is an impressive ornate royal residence by worldly standards. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is far more valuable than any physical palace. She is the official residence of the King of Kings on earth. She is indeed a Palace Beautiful when we, brothers and sisters, the living stones of which she is constructed, willingly live and serve together, ministering to one another work together as ‘*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called {us} out of darkness into his marvellous light*’ (1 Pet 2:9).

AMEN.