

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2017: FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST. YR A.

Gospel: Matthew 18: 10-20 (Sermon based on 15-20)

**“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone . . . If he does not listen, take two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church . . .**

**“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”**

A priest, a minister and a rabbi are discussing when life begins. The priest says, “It begins at conception”. The minister says, “Life begins at 24 weeks gestation”. The rabbi says, “You are both wrong, Life begins when the kids move out of the house and the dog dies.”

**In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Chapter 18 of Matthew’s Gospel is a collection of Jesus’ sayings on the practical challenges facing the Christian community, including status-seeking, scandal, division and, the topic of today’s reading, conflict.

Today’s Gospel reading sounds more like regulations devised by an ecclesiastical committee than a discourse by Jesus (this chapter has been called the “church-order discourse” of Jesus). But the real point of Jesus’ exhortation is that we must never tolerate any breach of personal relationship between us and another member of the Christian community. At each stage of the process – personal discussion, discussion before witnesses, discussion before the whole community – the goal is to win the erring Christian back to the community (the three-step process of reconciliation outlined by Jesus here corresponds to the procedure of the Qumran community).

Jesus’ exhortation closes with a promise of God’s presence in the midst of every community, regardless of size, bound together by faith.

Today’s Gospel outlines a process of reconciliation among divided members of a community. Jesus calls his hearers to seek honesty and sincerity in all relationships, to put aside self-interest, anger and wounded pride, and take the first step in healing

the rifts that destroy the sense of love that binds family and friends, church and community – the love of Christ is the "debt" that binds us to one another.

In the “rules” and “procedures” for bringing sinners back to the community he lays out in today’s Gospel, Jesus calls us to build communities that are **inclusive**, not exclusive: to bring the lost back, not out of pride or zealousness, but out of “the debt that binds us to love one another.”

If there is someone who you know holds a grudge against you for something you did, or were perceived to have done, either recently or ages ago, apologise and sincerely ask forgiveness. Likewise, if there is someone who comes to you and asks forgiveness for something that has caused you to hold a grudge against them, grant them forgiveness.

My friends, to ask forgiveness is not weakness. And to grant forgiveness is not to condone what someone has done. They are merely steps toward reconciliation – the thing that Jesus did when he reconciled the whole world to God by hanging on a cross. If He can do that for us, surely, we can do this for each other, and for Him.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the “church” — not the institutional capital ‘C’ Church, but the lower-case ‘c’ church that is you and I, human beings who struggle to follow Jesus. That is the important lesson of today’s Gospel: the ability of individuals who come together as disciples, inspired by the Gospel Jesus, to accomplish great works of compassion, reconciliation, healing and justice, where even the smallest and youngest and least able to contribute, are as welcomed and honoured as we would welcome and honour Christ himself.

Christ promises that whenever we gather in his name, he is in our midst. Sometimes it requires an extra sharp and focused vision of faith to realise and recognise Christ with us, but he is always there. Christ’s presence should move us, inspire us, and transform us into a community of disciples and witnesses of his resurrection.

Amen.