

Trinity XIII Year A 2020 (Proper 18/OT23)

Our readings this morning have a common theme – that of sin and the approach of the faithful to problems within the community of Faith. Ezekiel deals with the house of Israel, and he is charged through faith to proclaim to the people that they are failing in living their lives in a way which transforms not just themselves, but those with whom they have contact – and I think that this latter point is always implicit in Faith terms – something which also becomes the norm for emerging Christianity.

As we start to approach the end of our year exploring Matthew's Gospel, today we have heard a passage that might seem greatly at odds with modern society. The social climate in which we live might seem so fluid that to many such a passage will sound censorious – a poking of our noses into other people's business. The terrors of pursuance by the Twitter mob or those on Facebook and the like, provide us with examples of the untrammelled nature of abuse which can arise when the voice of the utterer matters beyond all else, and offers a place on the bandwagon to those who are like-minded. It is all pretty horrifying. Don't get me wrong. I am sure there is a place for social media, but even in a democratic, free society, there needs to be moderation.

Our Faith offers the polar opposite to all this, and what Matthew is offering us is a view of the ideal Christian communal life. Today we hear the fourth of five discourses or bodies of teaching which Jesus gives within the Gospel. This discourse – the whole of chapter 18 - is entirely devoted to life in the Community of the Church – the Body of Christ. Now you know as well as I do how fractured the body of Christ will seem to the outsider, and yet this passage exemplifies the ideals to which we should **all** strive. The earlier part of the discourse explains that unless we change and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. *'Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'* 18: 4-5

In other words, what we learn is that humility should prevail within the church, particularly in relation to its care for more vulnerable members. Even so, what we hear today is a passage which might make us feel uncomfortable. I don't know about you, but I'm not very good at confronting the individual fault of others – I have too many faults myself. Yet here we are, called to deal with errant brothers and sisters. Note, however, that everything undertaken in this regard seeks to preserve those in error from public shame.

It is far removed from the naming and shaming which some Christian communities have traditionally undertaken, or the whiff of sulphur surrounding some proclamations of the Gospel. [How green was my valley – Richard Llewelyn] Sarah Allgood

What should colour the whole approach to what we have heard is that it is set within the context of unbounded forgiveness, as we shall hear next week. Divine forgiveness in the present is unmerited and total, and we must always bear this in mind, recognising this forgiveness and passing on this wondrous gift from God.

In some sense this is made easier for us by Paul's words on love we heard from his Letter to the Romans. These give us an understanding of the transformational life to which we are all called through Jesus Christ. It's so much at the heart of Paul, that sometimes we forget the way in which his life has been transformed through faith. Paul is keen to remind us that there is no domain of Christian life (or any area of other people's lives) exempt from the transformational love of Jesus made known through death and resurrection.

The way that we are called to express this is to Love our neighbour as our self – this colours our understanding of who **we** are - called to understand that we are not to consider ourselves centre stage in the way that we live our lives. We are, of course, absolutely centre stage in **God's** eyes through boundless Love, but **we** find our true selves when we love our neighbours as ourselves. Whilst this might be easy for our nearest and dearest, sometimes this will seem impossible to us with others. How are we to love people (for instance) who seek to destroy our way of life. Or what are we to make of the behaviour of those we hear about when they seem so far from the ideals we try to live up to? It seems so far removed from Christian ideals – and indeed is! Then there are the many aspects of modern life geared up to place ourselves centre-stage, when actually it's all mostly pretty unimportant when food banks exist in many towns and we hear of the dysfunction in so many people's lives! What is our response to be as people of Faith?

What is so remarkable about Paul's words today is that they turn the understanding of the 10 Commandments (which are expressed mostly in the negative) into the positivity of Divine Love's transformation. This in turn leads us to the knowledge of the light of Christ within our own lives. Biblical scholars think that at the heart of the urgent appeal of vs 11-14 is an early baptismal hymn or instruction – probably similar to that which appears in Ephesians (5: 14) when we are exhorted:

**Awake, O sleeper,
And arise from the dead
And Christ will shine his light upon you.**

This is our answer to the world - the call to new life in Jesus Christ. This is a constant appeal to us, both personally and as a member of the Body of Christ; together with the privilege to recognise our call to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ – revealing to others the fulness of life found through following Jesus – the true Light of the world.



Mosaic, Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington DC. The inscription above reads: Christ reigns, Christ Rules. Eternal Victor, Eternal King. His kingdom is an everlasting Kingdom that shall not be taken away.

The mosaic was inspired by Isaiah 63:1-2: Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments, from Bozrah? Who is this, glorious in his apparel, striding in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, I who announce vindication, mighty to save." Why is your apparel red, and your garments like one who treads the wine press?

On the Dedication Day, November 20, 1959, Christ in Majesty was the only mosaic ornamentation in the Great Upper Church.

Ezekiel 33:7-11

⁷ So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸ If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die', and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

¹⁰ Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?' ¹¹ Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Romans 13: 8-end

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

⁹ The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; ¹³ let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.

¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one

or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to

listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in

heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'