

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Trinity 13

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Ezekiel 33:7-11 Ps 119:33-40 Romans 13:8-end **Matthew:  
18:15-20**

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”

These words of Jesus from the end of today’s gospel are perhaps some of his most reassuring. They are certainly words I have regularly quoted through my ministry here to reassure the tiniest congregations that what we are doing together is graced by Jesus’ presence. In a world where big is beautiful, Jesus gives us a different perspective – every person in a church congregation matters, and a gathering can be as small as two. These are also remarkable words: the one who lived and died over two thousand years ago is present in our gathering now. As the greeting: “the Lord be with you” rings out, we are making conscious the unseen host of our gathering, the Lord himself. Not bounded by a tomb or locked door, Jesus, I have no doubt, is better at managing virtual contact too, so what goes for a gathering in church, goes for the connection we make as we share an intention to worship at home.

It may be appropriate to pause just for a moment and let all this really sink in. To welcome Jesus’ presence here and now.

It is with the perspective brought by knowing he is with us that we need to look at the less quoted words leading up to the promise of that presence. And today I am going to look what lies behind that promise to explore just what quality of life Jesus is calling his friends, his church to share. Just as the promise of his presence in our midst is remarkable, so too is the difference that can be

making to how we relate to one another, becoming a sign to the world of what life in Jesus' presence truly looks like.

Today's gospel starts in the reality of a community where divisions arise, where people hurt one another and where sin – that is behaviour that is in opposition to God's loving will happens. A real place, a real church.

I don't know how you react to Jesus' guidelines on what to do if a fellow church member does something that injures you. The steadily widening levels of dispute management might sound quite drastic, conjuring up historical images of the church service as the place where the village's offenders were shamed and scapegoated.

That is not what Jesus is proposing.

Jesus' teaching is, first, accepting the reality of difference and hurt in human relationships and acknowledging that church communities are not immune to this, but second, guiding his community to enter into the new reality offered by his resurrection to come, where agreement which is found through the awareness of his presence becomes the context for resolving hurts.

If we start with a culture of antagonism and judgement the guidance on dealing with offence sounds harsh. If we picture a community with a culture of genuinely mutual love, the guidance turns into a gentler process designed to give multiple chances for reconciliation (as next week's gospel will confirm!)

In a community shaped by such genuinely mutual love, true discernment will be possible.

Discernment is the skill of noticing where God's promptings and guidance is leading. It involves listening and observing, noticing where there is life and spiritual movement towards God and staying with what we have notices as it unfolds creatively Godwards. It is the gift of making Spirit led decisions, of allowing God to connect what we decide on earth with what is God's good will: on earth as it is in heaven.

And Jesus says that connection becomes clear when the community in which he is present come to agreement:

“if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven”: that’s quite a claim....

And not one that churches get to test out very often: because agreement is not something we find easy!

In very practical terms lack of agreement holds decisions up and can deaden the life of new ideas and hope; it can create a fractious atmosphere in a community and weaken genuinely mutual love. It can get in the way of recognising that Jesus is in our midst and hold us back from finding in our gathering with him the energy to offer his love to the world.

Godly agreement is not found as a competition between winners and losers, or by eradicating different opinions, but by a community secure in the presence of Jesus listening to one another, discovering where there is movement towards God in the conversation and staying with that movement to be guided together Godwards into action. Learning how to seek such agreement is a gift in our own life, but is also a gift that the church could be offering in a world where a culture of polarised disagreement is too evident.

In reality, I suspect that if we hold our own church communities up to the mirror of this gospel – it is the capacity to come to agreement about what shapes our life together and act to deepen our common life that is a greater challenge than dealing with those who offend. And over the next months we will need to be talking together and working together to discern the safe and creative ways to move Godward together in the current context.

So that is where I am going to suggest we focus our asking!

Over the next couple of weeks our gospel readings are all about the relationships we have with one another as Jesus outlines ways of loving one another that enable us to reflect his love.

As these guide our public worship I invite you to give some private prayer time and thought to:

the way you pray for all the members of your congregation and community: if you don't already can you make it your intention to pray for each other?

the way you react to others who hold a different view point from yours: if you don't already, can you make it a habit to ask to see the presence of God in them and their viewpoint?

what God might be showing you about all that together we need to ask for the coming months?

Lord Jesus, as we often give you thanks for your presence in our midst, so guide us towards the agreement that brings unity to our prayers and the love we together want to offer the world. Amen