

Reflection for 6th September (Trinity 14)

There are some texts of scripture which acquire a life of their own, quite independent of the context in which they were originally written. One example of this is the phrase at the end of our Gospel reading today where Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them." These are words which have often been used as a source of inspiration to Christians coming together for worship, and sometimes as a source of comfort. Occasionally they are used with a touch of irony, such as when a congregation really does consist of only a handful of people. But in Matthew's Gospel, the phrase comes at the end of a passage about discipline among the followers of Jesus, so what might its meaning be in this context?

Early Christian congregations were isolated units and were therefore prone to the danger of falling into local disputes. St Paul faced many problems caused by personality conflicts and theological infighting within Christian fellowships. He pleaded again and again for Christian love and tolerance to be the guiding light for people's conduct in such situations – a message which the Church has constantly needed to hear ever since, and still needs to hear today. In our passage from his letter to the Romans today, Paul addresses himself to such a situation, with the words "Owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Matthew chapter 18 comes from a similar context. There are strong hints that the Gospel writer has experienced difficulties in his own congregation, and has gathered together in this passage some sayings of Jesus which are helpful in providing guidance when quarrels or rivalries were threatening the peace of the Church.

We are all aware of differences of opinion within churches: human nature being what it is, this has been so since the beginning, and continues to this day. The problem is not the fact that Christians disagree: that will always happen, and it can be a good and positive thing. The problem lies in the way in which disputes are dealt with. How we make decisions in the church is almost as important as what we decide. When disagreements take place in a disordered or acrimonious way, our witness to the world outside is a poor one. But if people outside the Church can look on in admiration and say, "They may not agree with one another, but they still love each other and respect each other's point of view", then we are achieving something of what Jesus asks of us in this passage.

Bob Whittle