

## ***The Church's prayer for this Sunday - The thirteenth Sunday after Trinity***

Almighty God,  
you search us out and know us:  
may we rely on you in strength  
and rest on you in weakness,  
now and in all our days;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020, The thirteenth Sunday after Trinity**

### **Psalm 119: 33-40**

- <sup>33</sup> Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,  
and I will observe it to the end.
- <sup>34</sup> Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.
- <sup>35</sup> Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.
- <sup>36</sup> Turn my heart to your decrees,  
and not to selfish gain.
- <sup>37</sup> Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
give me life in your ways.
- <sup>38</sup> Confirm to your servant your promise,  
which is for those who fear you.
- <sup>39</sup> Turn away the disgrace that I dread,  
for your ordinances are good.
- <sup>40</sup> See, I have longed for your precepts;  
in your righteousness give me life.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

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### **Today's reading from the Old Testament: Ezekiel 33: 7-11**

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

## God's Justice and Mercy

<sup>10</sup>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?' <sup>11</sup>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?

**For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

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## Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 18: 15-20

### Reproving Another Who Sins

<sup>15</sup> '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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

**For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.**

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## A reflection for the thirteenth Sunday after Trinity from Revd Alison Walker, Methodist Minister and member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter.

I wonder, if I asked you, "what is the biggest argument that ever took place in your church?" would you tell me?!

Even if you did tell me, I wouldn't be shocked by any of it, as I have heard all of it before. We want the church to be a place of perfect peace and harmony, in reality it is full of people who are as full of sin, vanity, need, a desire to be accepted, and a desire to exercise control, as I am. A church which has learnt how to handle difference and disagreement should be a healthier and more honest place. The only churches in which there are no disagreements at all are churches in which everyone is pretending. The Church should be the place where we do not have to pretend, where we are accepted and loved and, yes, sometimes challenged, but always with peace; always with love.

Such honesty with each other is difficult and a bit scary. It means dealing with me and all my funny ways, at the same time as I am trying to love and accept you with all your funny ways. In church, we hope to experience God's love, that comes to us both directly from God and from our fellow-Christians – who are all as loving and as vulnerable as you or I.

Wouldn't it all be so much easier, then, not to come to church? Not to bring those hopes that might be disappointed; not because God lets us down, but because other members of our churches are just as fallible, or stressed out, or insensitive, as we are?!

Unfortunately, you can't, because you cannot be a solitary Christian. You cannot be a Christian separated from the Church. God works everywhere, you can find God everywhere, but you can only find a community that is committed to being Christ's body here in the Church. And no matter how awkward some of our church members undoubtedly are, you need them in order to be a Christian.

And so, starting with the last verse of our gospel passage this morning, this is what we learn: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Not simply a social appointment or a chance meeting, but a deliberate gathering in Jesus' name with the promise of his presence.

I hope you find it reassuring and pleasant to know that Jesus is here. A guaranteed promise that is true, whether or not we sense God's presence in any given moment.

But it should also be a bit troubling too! Because it means that Jesus knows all about everything that happens in his presence - all the good bits and the bad ones. Jesus is watching you indeed!! Perhaps it is this sense of discomfort (was I spotted? Yes, I was!!) that means we sometimes seek to avoid the church. It also means that how we relate to each other in church matters, because it matters to God.

Christian belief in the Trinity means that we believe that God is in community with Godself. That in the very being of God there are relationships of love. We are invited into relationship with this loving God and so, then, all of our human relationships should be modelled on the loving relationships of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But we find this difficult, and sometimes we fail. The church community should seek to restore broken relationships. In this passage Jesus is teaching his disciples, those who will become leaders in the church. This passage is anachronistic, as Jesus talks about church structures that do not yet exist in his lifetime. That causes a problem for the biblical academics, but I think we are supposed to read the gospels from a post-resurrection perspective, in which the church is present. The church is always imperfect. Churches have a historic tendency to resolve conflict poorly; church splits are a sad example of how we fail to live with difference. In order for a church to be the place where we can all bring our honest and vulnerable selves, then we need to learn to be free from bitter arguments and any disagreements should be ones that are seeking the common good and not be just petty fallings-out.

And so, what follows is a simple way to resolve conflict that focusses on talking and listening, in person, one to one (not, I note the way we have to communicate now with zoom etc, which is not ideal). If that doesn't resolve the issue, next is suggested an open conversation, (not, I note, grumbling in the corner, nor sidling up to the minister and saying: "a few people have been saying to me....")

And finally, if all of this talking and listening still has not resolved things, take the issue to a public meeting of the church, and if that doesn't work let that person be to you as a "Gentile and a tax collector".

The first time I read this, I thought: "jolly good too, if after all of that conversation when the other person stubbornly refuses to listen, send them away!" The assumption that I made here is that the disciple is in the right and the other person needs to listen and to change. If they do not, it is therefore correct that the other person is excluded.

And then I thought two things: I'm no disciple! Why should I identify with the one who is right? Perhaps, in any disagreement, the one who should be listening is me, not the other person. In other words, be wary of who you identify with in this passage - "you" may not be the "you" that Jesus is addressing.

Secondly, what does it mean in the gospels to be a Gentile and a tax collector? Yes, you were excluded from Jewish society and religious practices as a Gentile, and viewed as a treacherous collaborator with the Romans if you were a tax collector – but what did Jesus do with these people? He welcomed them; more than that, he deliberately sought them out, like Zacchaeus. He ate in their houses, he healed their sick, he proclaimed to them that God's kingdom, the reign of God's love, now included them. To treat someone as a Gentile and tax collector does not mean to exclude, but to lovingly and deliberately include, with words and actions that demonstrate God's message of love.

I think here we have a scenario in which this person who is not truly listened to the Gospel of Jesus about forgiveness, and the good news of God's love and grace, which helps us resolve conflicts. And so needs to be reminded of the Gospel. The other church members, then, are those who have experienced and worked through what it means to receive God's forgiveness and to live in the good news of God's love and grace. If we have, then we are able to accept our share of responsibility for the life of the church, for the good parts and for the mistakes. We know that when we acknowledge those mistakes before God, then we are liberated from them, so that we learn how to live better.

These statements are far more than a set of guidelines for our complaints procedures. They are about the values of being a church – values based on acknowledging that the church belongs to Jesus, because it gathers in his name and acknowledges his presence. In the next few weeks of Gospel readings, we hear more about what it means to be a church and how we should live as church – the values of our communities. The ground of all is found in our Gospel story today: forgiveness which leads to reconciliation, and love.