

05 Trinity 15

Readings: Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

A couple of weeks ago I was completing a form which as with so many now, asked a question about my ethnic origin. This form had an additional question which I don't think I've come across asked in this particular way before. It asked me to state my national identity – and it gave me several options: British, or English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh or Other or the right to refuse to answer altogether. I didn't refuse to answer then but I am going to exercise my right to refuse to make public whether I said I was British or Welsh.

Questions of identity – national, religious or otherwise have featured strongly in public debate of late. In the wake of the London bombings, Norman Tebbit has called for a reconsideration of his infamous cricket test to determine just where the loyalties of immigrants lie. I haven't the heart to tell Mr. Tebbit that I personally find it much easier to support a team called England when their bowling averages are topped by a bowler called Jones who comes from Murrumbidgee!

In the debate over internal security, we are being challenged to state our identity in more definite ways. “Are you firstly British or Muslim” ? was the one of the ways this was voiced in response to July 7. Such questions seem to me entirely false. Am I first and foremost Welsh, British, Christian, a woman, a priest, a Griffiths? The answer depends so much on the context in which the question is asked.

And perhaps we need to frame the questions differently. Perhaps we ought to be asking questions more like: What binds me to who I am? And to other people? What looses me to be who I am? And frees and enables others to be who they are? Who or what is present in our midst when we do claim some common identity? And if I identify myself with a particular group or community what responsibilities does that bring?

The Church too has long struggled with its own identity and the impact of internal differences on that identity - as its long and often unsavoury history of factions, disputes and heresies bears witness. What we believe can be crucial in defining identity, and how tightly bound we are into that identity.

And there are those of us who believe that there are some within the Anglican communion today who are intent on developing the Church's own version of the Tebbit cricket test. Unless we can sign up to a very particular interpretation of certain Scripture texts then we can't really be accepted as part of that communion.

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I'm never quite sure whether to be dispirited or heartened by the passage we heard today from Matthew's Gospel. At one level, it's reassuring to know in a perverse sort of way that disputes within the Christian community are nothing new! After all Matthew was writing in the first century perhaps less than 50 years after the Crucifixion. But here is a church already struggling enough with difference and resolving disputes to make it necessary to get some procedures in place to deal with it. Matthew's church community probably consisted of largely Jewish Christians, and it's not surprising that in many things, including the settling of disputes they continued the practice with which they were familiar. So what we get in today's Gospel is pretty much the procedure set out in Leviticus and

Deuteronomy – the Jewish rule books – for dealing with disputes. First, try and sort it out between yourselves privately. If that doesn't work, then try and again in the presence of a couple of reliable witnesses; and finally if that fails, bring it to the whole community. And if that doesn't work, then :

let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, let them be as those with whom we have nothing in common. They have stepped beyond the limits of that which binds us as a community – and for the sake of the community they have to be excluded.

That final conclusion, is more or less what is being said in secular society today about those who threaten our way of life – they have stepped outside that which binds us together as a functioning, democratic society and therefore must be excluded from it. They are some within the Anglican communion who would probably make a similar claim about some members of the Episcopal Church of the USA and the Anglican Church in Canada – they too, some do argue, have stepped outside that which binds the communion together and therefore need to be excluded from it.

And I think, it's at that point, I begin to see why I'm not really a detailed procedure person. The scientist within knows the need for such procedures and structures, and can handle the logic of where they take us. The human being within balks at the destination. At a very deep level, being bound by such procedural logic in the mess of human relationships feels more like strangulation than the reassurance of knowing exactly where we stand. Which is I guess, where those earlier questions come from:

So if it's not rules, and procedures then what is it that binds me to who I am? And to other people? What looses me to be who I am? And frees and enables others to be who they are? Who or what is present in our midst when we do claim some common identity? And if I identify myself with a particular group or community what responsibilities does that bring?

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I was forcibly struck by those words, when I read them again recently. Because to me they say something immensely challenging about the relationship between the way we live as a Christian community in the here and now and the way we live in eternity. At one level, that generates the fearful image of arriving at the pearly gates to be greeted by a Heavenly Health and Safety Manual with the instructions to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. But at a more profound level, it charges us with the responsibility for modelling the relationships of the Kingdom here on earth. Personally, I can never read that final sentence “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” as a comfort for those meetings or services where a mere handful turn up. Rather they seem to me to bring a responsibility to incarnate Christ in our midst in the way we live, and speak and deal with our differences. And to those who might accuse me, in true liberal fashion, of being much happier being loosed than being bound, I'd want to say that the responsibility to incarnate Christ in our midst is one which I see as binding to the point of being indisputable and absolute.

So if we are bound to the calling to make Christ present among us, if we are bound by the calling to model the relationships of the Kingdom within our community today both in the things we can agree on, and those which divide us, then how does that begin to impact on us and define us as individuals, as a local community, as part of the Anglican communion, as part of a complex multicultural, multifaith and global society. I'm not sure there's any list of procedures, any tick box on a form, or any cricket test that can necessarily help us here.

Rather it feels more like an ongoing commitment to the hard work of prayer and reflection and to ask the deeper questions of identity of ourselves and of one another – both in agreement and in difference.

So in all the messiness of here today in St. Martin's, in all the messiness of the Anglican communion, this city, and global society:

What is it that binds me to who I am and to other people? What looses me to be who I am? And frees and enables others to be who they are? And who or what is present in our midst in what we speak and do and in the ways we live day by day?