

7th September 2008 : Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Romans 13.8-14 Matthew 18.15-20

Jesus said, “When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” Mt 18.20

It’s lovely to be back, if only for a Sunday in the midst of my sabbatical. The weather was better in a southern hemisphere winter in Argentina. I don’t know what you’ve been doing but not only is Liz Russell leaving but Nick Danks, as well! Seven years ago Liz was taken on as an additional member of the clergy team to ensure that through a focus on spirituality and pastoral care the people as well as the buildings of St Martin’s might be renewed. She has helped deepen and strengthen our lives and now the project is coming towards its long overdue end, it’s right that she moves on. In a sense, as with so many people and priests before, we are sending her out to serve the wider church. We’re glad that she’s not going far. Prince Consort Road is at the other end of the Deanery. Liz, go with God’s blessing and our thanks.

The most obvious thing from my sabbatical so far is that if you have been living under pressure for a long time – and with the Renewal project we have – when you stop you realise how tired you are. Now that we have been on holiday, moved back from Victoria to the Vicarage and been on holiday again, I am no longer physically tired. Coming back I am full of admiration for the team still working on it and how good they are to make it possible for me to go away at this point.

Of course St Martin’s goes on very well without me. God has been worshipped and people have been cared for and the building work is moving on towards its conclusion. Thanks to an anonymous pledge of £100,000 made this week the fundraising target is now below £1.7 million. Perhaps the most obvious lesson for myself, Liz, Nick and all of u, is that we make a valuable contribution as part of the community in this place, *and* it depends on God rather than us. Jesus spoke of when he said, “When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them”. So now I am looking forward to a time set aside for study and for prayer and to paying attention to what is going on within me, not just around me. For we all know that life is to be lived whole, and what we seek is integration of body, mind and spirit.

This week I have been reading Rowan Williams’ Tokens of Trust (Canterbury Press 2007 £9.99) What an extraordinary Archbishop we have, who can produce a book of poems, a study of faith and doubt in Dostoyevsky and an introduction to Christian belief all in the run-up to the Lambeth Conference! In Tokens of Trust, he says that Christian belief is really about knowing who and what to trust. In the interaction between thinking, doing and praying we place our trust in God and find our freedom.

So often the commandments are read as restrictions, “Thou shalt not”. But if we hear them as in today’s Gospel, as the framework whereby we can be ourselves, live in love

and not be indebted to anyone else out of fear or anxiety or guilt, then by trusting in God we will find the freedom to live for others and not just for ourselves. Our age finds that very difficult to hear: the Law creates freedom for us.

For most of us life is not smooth. A young student in my first term teaching Christian ethics at a theological college said, "Don't you think most of us learn about doing good through our immorality?" I don't think he was entirely right but for some of us most of the time, and all of us some of the time, life is bumpy, we get things wrong, step over the mark, feel guilty or ashamed.... and still Christ finds us, forgives us, renews us, brings us back and we can start again. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8).

When reading the Bible I love the little insights that let you feel what the writer was really like. In today's Gospel reading Matthew lets his guard drop and prejudices show when struggling to tell us the implication of sin. He says that if another member of the church sins, go and point it out privately. If they don't listen take a couple of witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, then the worst thing Matthew, a Jewish Christian, can think of is, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector"! For Matthew, these were the scum of the earth and he still didn't really get it that even they could be included among God's people - as sometimes we don't either.

Rowan Williams writes, "The most truthful image we can have of hell is of God eternally knocking on a closed door that we are struggling to hold shut". It's a very Johannine image of Christ standing at the door and knocking on the door. It's common religious experience and is why Holman Hunt's painting of 'Christ the light of the world' in St Paul's cathedral is one of the most popular religious paintings. Christ stands in the garden holding a lantern, knocking on the door of our hearts. He waits because there is no handle on the outside of the door which can only be opened from the inside.

Far from Hell being other people, what is needed for us to break out is to be open to others, to the stranger, to Christ. So according to Matthew we should begin by encouraging one another in the way of Jesus Christ –challenge, exhort, remonstrate, not just to force conformity but to find truth, unity and love in Christ who said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them".

There's a real piece of church discipline laid down here. "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven". In the current state of the Anglican Communion, some chance! That's why in the Lord's Prayer we pray to the Father, "*Thy* will be done...". It's why church matters, because here we stand *together* with Christ, and know the truth Jesus spoke of when he said, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" not just here in Trafalgar Square but in Holy Trinity Prince Consort Road, in Cambridge, and in the Church throughout the world.