

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020**  
**Trinity 13 (A)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Ezekiel 33.7-11**  
**NT: Romans 13.8-end**  
**G: Matthew 18.15-20**

‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them’

Liverpool Parish Church does strange things to a person- I need not tell you all that of course, you’re here and you know it better than any- good things, mostly, but strange ones nonetheless. Yet, of course, this is a place where the Christian verity has been taught and the sacraments celebrated for many hundreds of years and so it is entirely expected that a little bit of oddness, a little bit of pre-existent oddness, as well as, it is to be hoped, prevenient grace, lingers in the air. That said- some things have changed over the years- I am sorry to report to you that the standard of curates has dropped catastrophically. One of my predecessors was Michael Ramsay- who rose to be Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of All England etc- now you are, for the time being at least, stuck with me (although you will all be most welcome to visit when I am appointed deputy port chaplain in Vladivostok or wherever it is I am eventually sent).

Yet strange things happened even to Ramsay. By the end of his career he would start the day by banging his head on his desk and repeating this mantra: ‘I hate the Church of England, I hate the Church of England, I hate the Church of England’. Sometimes it is all too easy to sympathise. Churches- both with a capital C, in their large national and international senses and with a small c in their local sense, can be frustrating, can be institutions which inspire the very opposite of that which they are supposed to- being focusses of division, disagreement and pain.

At first reading then, our lesson from the Gospel today seems to be totally detached from the reality of what Church is like and how disputes are resolved within them. We hear of listening, of calm pointing out of fault, and resolution of issues not via social media or behind backs or in the letters pages of the Church Times, but in generous community. It seems like an almost unattainable standard is being set in the teaching of Christ for his followers.

Questions abound- how could I point out fault without wounding? Would I myself not bristle with annoyance if fault was pointed out in me? How do we trust the witnesses of two or three? Are we not too corrupt in our motives and our structures and, indeed, in our nature to live thus? What on earth will our fate be in Heaven if what we have bound as a Church here on earth is to be bound there also?

Our other readings are much the same, providing high standards for how it is we engage with one another and live in a faithful community, all seemingly at odds with what we know to be the choppy currents of human nature. Ezekiel is continually addressed by God as 'mortal', emphasising his own frailty, his own lack of understanding, in the face of the Divine. And he- after all- is a prophet. If his best hope is being merely a conduit then what hope have we? As for our second reading; Paul's list of things we should not do reads as a much more inviting prospect to most human hearts than his request to 'live in the day' does. Therein lies the challenge of Christian virtue- both for us as individuals and for us as a Church, seeking to journey along the narrow path as one people- and all too often, both as individuals and as a Church, failing in our response to live as Christians. Such is human nature and yet, we are still held to that higher standard. We are still called to live that life- and we know that God does not call us to that which we cannot bear or endure- so what is going on?

As ever with the Holy Gospel, there is hope. On one level of course, gathering together forces us to look outside ourselves,, forces us to confront and, it is to be hoped, love the

other rather than be comfortable within ourselves. Yet that might be true of any gathering of people- providing, of course, these days that there are less than thirty of them. What is different about Church, what is different about our calling as Christians, what makes our communal struggling against our selfish instincts different to mere therapeutic moralism is that we gather together in the name of Jesus Christ.

If we make anything other than Christ the purpose and point of our coming together then we are bound to fail. We cannot have our own shibboleths but must have Christ yesterday, today, tomorrow, and forever, lest we end up hoisted by the petard of our moralism. He is the one to whom we must cling- for otherwise what does our presence here serve? It is this reason why- to return briefly to the theme of Church arguments- the debates around Christology were so vigorously (and sometimes viciously- who can forget our own great patron, St Nicholas, punching the heretic Arius at the Council of Nicaea) conducted: because the most important thing we have to bind us here on earth and to whom we will be bound in Heaven, is Christ.

Unlike Archbishop Ramsey- I do not hate the Church of England (I doubt, if, deep down, he did either, and we will forgive him his understandable linguistic lapse). I don't hate the Church of England because the Church of England is all of you and Jesus Christ tells me I must love you. Perhaps even more importantly, Jesus Christ manages to love me- and a more obviously unlovable figure I can scarcely imagine- and so the continuance of his love beyond myself becomes my duty and joy, even for one who his a paid up misanthrope. This might sound oxymoronic- but the love is not my own, expressed because I am a good person- whatever that means- but it is, instead, his. That is why we gather together- to make him present, and in so doing, to dwell in his love.

Jesus Christ does strange things to a person, and even stranger things to a group of people. Good things, but strange ones when considered against the furies and futilities that are the norms of human nature. Jesus Christ is capable of such transformation, in fact, that our Gospel might not seem like airy idealism, but be substantive reality. Let our hearts, let our churches be focussed first and foremost on the person of Jesus Christ, let us invoke the power of his most Holy Name long before we invoke our own , let us deck ourselves in his vesture rather than seek to deck him in ours, let us, in short, gather in his name before all else and feel his presence here among us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie