

SERMON: Sunday 10th September 2017

Readings: Matthew 18.15-20; Romans 13.8-14

Address

For where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is there among them.

More often than not, we take the phrase 'where two or three are gathered' as a consolation when hardly anyone turns up for a church activity. It is reassuring, but it only skims the meaning of this verse.

These words have a much deeper meaning than simply, 'if you turn up Christ is there'. If we read it carefully it means we have to gather in Christ's name, and then Christ is there among us.

Gathering in Christ's name is all about our intention and expectation.

What is our intention? What draws us to gather together?

What is our expectation? What do we expect to happen when we get here, and are we open to being different, to making a change, afterwards?

Being a Christian is not a static state. It is not a single decision. It is not a non-stick coating on your spirit. Being a Christian is an ongoing commitment to living the Way of Christ.

Being a Christian is a decision we remake every day, either consciously or unconsciously. We may consciously decide to come along here, to help someone, to give to charity, or make a million other definite decisions that in some way contribute to God's Kingdom being lived.

We may also unconsciously act or think in ways that affirm or detract from our claim to be a Christian.

As we heard from Paul as he wrote to the church in Rome:

"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

We are called to focus on the spiritual aspects of life, to give them prominence, and not our earthly desires.

We are to be light in the world; to live as if every moment of our lives is seen by everyone else and known to God; to celebrate with moderation and restraint; to act with integrity and prudence; and to interact with each other with equality and fairness. In many and varied ways, to love God, love ourselves, and to love each other.

It is this challenge to live Christ-like lives that must inform our intention to gather together, our expectations for what might happen while we're here and that we may decide we need to do something different afterwards. This is the glue that binds us together as a congregation, and each of us to the heart of God.

We all have our own preferences, needs and personalities but to some extent they should all be tempered by our desire to live for Christ, and to share in our fellowship together.

Being a Christian, living following Christ's example, will have made differences to our behaviour, the choices we make, and our attitudes. Facing the challenge to love God, love ourselves and love others, will have placed decisions great and small before us, and will continue to do so.

Choosing to live out those decisions within a congregation will have brought many challenges, compromises and changes, as well as many friendships, and sources of support and encouragement.

Being a Christian is a communal activity. We have images of being the 'body of Christ', of being brothers and sisters, children of God. Images that point to each of us being essential for the whole to function, to being a family in which we all have an equal relationship with each other, and a loving and mutual relationship with our parent God and our older brother Christ.

It is after taking on board these relationships that we should consider the guidance we are offered on how to deal with conflict between each other.

If someone says something to you that you don't like, talk to them about it privately. Talk to them as a brother or a sister, talk to them as an equal, talk to them as a fellow unique and essential member of the body of Christ.

Talk to them with humility, acknowledging that you might be mistaken. You might have misheard, got the wrong end of the stick, could have upset them accidentally, or just be in the wrong. Hopefully this approach will lead to reconciliation, to better understanding, to compromise, or agreeing to disagree.

If it doesn't then you invite one or two others to join you.

In effect, you are now repeating your previous conversation, maybe with a little more clarity, with one or two witnesses. Again, this is an open-ended discussion. Just because you invited those one or two to join you, doesn't mean they will totally agree with you.

Bringing more people into the conversation broadens the perspective, increases the possible thoughts to be shared, and increases the possibility that a middle-way could be discerned.

If this doesn't resolve the situation, it is then placed before the church. Now things might have changed since this process began. It started with you challenging someone, and it may still be the case that it is their side of the argument that you and the one or two others are speaking against. But it might be that the one or two don't agree with each other, or it might be that they both agree with the other person.

Opening ourselves up to these kind of open and affirming conversations is not about imposing our will upon others. It is about listening to each other, and discerning the mind of Christ amongst it all.

The issue is now before the whole church. The whole body of Christ, the whole family of God, who gather in Christ's name. Again, the same rules apply for how we engage with each other.

As a whole fellowship, we talk together as brothers and sisters, as equals, talking to each other as unique and essential members of the body of Christ. Talking with humility, openness and patience. Hopefully this approach will lead to reconciliation, to better understanding, to compromise, or agreeing to disagree.

This is all about determining the parameters of the community. It is about working out the expectations we have of each other. What is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

It might be quite specific with regard to believing certain things, ordering worship in a certain way, or behaving in a prescribed manner. Or it could be quite general by encouraging the attitudes that are desired whilst accepting that none of us are perfect.

Each congregation will work out what this means for itself. There will be things we hold in common with, and beyond, our tradition, but the specifics of what it means to be part of this congregation is down to us.

I would argue that the results of this discerning are secondary. Of primary importance is the atmosphere in which they are discerned.

If we talk together as brothers and sisters, as equals, talking to each other as unique and essential members of the body of Christ. Talking with humility, openness and patience.

Then we are being Church, we are being a Christ-like community, and I have faith that the results of our deliberations will be of God.

Our guidance from Matthew offers a final stage for anyone who refuses to live by the parameters of the community. In effect by their own choice they have left, they have stepped away from being a member. Matthew tells us if this happens: 'let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.'

Now, if we read this like a rule-following Pharisee we have the image of them being thrown outside of the wall. They are beyond the pale, excluded from God's chosen people, unclean, and contemptible.

But we are to read this as those that follow Christ's example, and who did Jesus spend most of his time with: Gentiles and the tax collectors. Yes, they have removed themselves from the fellowship but, if we follow Christ's example, we now spend even more time with them seeking to draw them back.

Matthew's teaching isn't about getting our own way or creating a little clique and labelling our opinions as Christ's. It is a challenge to a counter-cultural way of living and engaging with each other.

It is a pattern for seeking to restore relationships when they break down, of affirming each other and deepening relationships, and for holding us together as the Body of Christ, his brothers and sisters, and children of God.

For where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ is there among them.

In our worship, in our singing, praying and reflecting – Christ is there.

In our fellowship, in our talking, companionship and sharing food – Christ is there.

In our service, in our sharing, reaching out and welcoming – Christ is there.

We are one in Christ, as we rely on the Spirit and strive after God's Kingdom. **Amen**