



Revd Ro's Reflection on 14th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 18

Year A

Romans 13.8-14

Matthew 18.15-20

What does September mean to you? Some will still remember the declaration of war and the fear that came with it. More recently it was the month of the death of our late great Queen Elizabeth II. But for many, September will remind us of the start of a new term at school. The other day I watched the old classic, 'Goodbye Mr Chips' with Robert Donat. It's a lovely film but it amused me to hear the hymns 'Lord dismiss us' and 'Lord behold us' sung at the same tempo. As I remember it the first was a real gallop, the second a real dirge! I am quite sure the start of a new term still holds trepidation to some degree or another for many pupils starting a new class or even a new school. As a youngster I wasn't too keen on starting back in September even though I went to an excellent secondary modern school with a head teacher far in advance of her time. One thing I loved though about the first day back was being given brand new exercise books and writing as neatly as I could in them on a new blank page with no mistakes in it, or at least no mistakes in it yet!

It just struck me that really that is what Paul and Matthew are doing, they are writing as it were on a new page, instructing people who, if they accept Jesus' teachings, will join the fledgling church. Certainly Paul met with the disciples and people who knew Jesus, to discuss the way forward for the church, theology, and Jesus' teachings as a guide to behaviour. He was there almost right at the beginning and apart from being one of the twelve he could not have been closer to Jesus. In fact Paul always maintained that his revelation on the road to Damascus was in fact a meeting with Jesus as God, therefore he had every right to consider himself an apostle and equal to the disciples. Matthew's Gospel was written between AD 80 and 90, that would be some twenty years after Paul's letter to the Romans written at Corinth around 57 AD, and fifty years after the crucifixion at the earliest. The point is that the church had been established for some years.

The first thing I noticed was the use of the word, 'church' (Matthew 18.15) As with any institution nothing is perfect and Matthew has that in mind here. Mistakes are being made on the 'new page,'¹⁵ 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.'

Matthew's sources are Mark's gospel and a collection of Jesus' teachings and sayings known as Q. Matthew is the only gospel writer who makes a direct reference to the church, as in this passage. So a lot of the instruction given in Matthew's gospel is appropriate for situations that would have arisen in the early church.

The gospel reading this morning begins at Matthew 18.15, just prior to this we have this passage, 'Jesus called a child, whom he put among them,³ and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'

Humility and service are to be the key notes and love is central to that. Following on from that, and just prior to our gospel reading, Jesus says, at verse 12

¹² "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.'

The point Jesus is making is that forgiveness is vital. When accused of associating with sinners or outcasts, Jesus always says something similar. A person who is sorry and turns to God and tries to live a new life is assured of forgiveness. We only have to look at the penitent thief to see that.

I have begun with this because it is easier to understand the gospel passage in the light of it. Jesus teaches the new way, God's Good News, but human beings are not perfect and there will be wrangles, disputes and people who behave wrongly, as with every community.

¹⁵ 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.'

Jesus is talking to the disciples here but his words pertain to the early church and to us. How we deal with problems such as the one outlined above is the teaching contained in this passage. The point is that, as with the original readers, our guide must be Jesus' teaching. We should show love and caring not animosity and selfish desire for our own way.

Firstly one person has 'sinned' against another member of the church. The first thing to do is to go quietly aside and point that out to them. If the member of the church realises they are at fault in their behaviour then all is well, 'you have regained that one'. The trouble comes when that person is not sorry; even persists in their behaviour. The next advice is that witnesses to the fault or 'sin' are brought forward to confirm the action. It is all very much like the justice system really. The next stage would be to tell the church in general and if this final stage is not heeded then that person has chosen his or her own way not God's.

¹⁷ '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.'

That verse sounds awful and unforgiving but actually it is about a person having free will. God does not control us; he gives us free will to follow his ways or to turn our backs. Many have done that, love has no place in their philosophy and bullying and aggression is their order of the day. That is

why the world is in a sorry state both on the small and large scale. This takes me back to what I wrote earlier.

‘So the keynote of the passage is forgiveness. When accused of associating with sinners or outcasts, Jesus always says something similar. A person who is sorry and turns to God is assured of forgiveness.’

We must forgive but not condone, that is what we are taught, but if a person wilfully refuses to repent and continues with damaging behaviour then they will damage people, a church or any other institution.

If forgiveness is central, and Jesus forgave those who were hammering in the nails, then we have to try to do that. But we do not condone bad behaviour which is against Jesus’ teaching and we are called on to condemn it and to confront it. You can’t make a person stop their unacceptable behaviour but you need to stand up to them. That takes courage; especially when the one at fault is the one with the power be it within a church, institution or in government. Jesus did just that and often persecution will follow, I suppose that is in part what he meant when he said, ‘take up your cross and follow me.’

Jesus’ next words to his disciples, ‘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’ reminds us of his words to Peter after he had declared that Jesus was the Messiah. The disciples will carry the burden of responsibility when Jesus is no longer with them as leader. They will need to carry his teachings forward to the new church. The authority or authorisation is being given to these disciples from Jesus. They will need to found his church on the precepts he has taught them.

The final line is often quoted. ²⁰ ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Jesus is talking about the disciples’ authority given in his name. Equally however we are right in seeing it as referring to gathered worship. It is vitally important that we gather together with others when we can. Jesus is with us when we are alone too and in our personal prayer life. Whenever we call upon him he is there. I would say Jesus is within us, it is us who open the lines of communication with him in prayer.

The reading from Romans is continuing Matthew’s teaching to those early converts. Paul calls himself ‘the apostle to the Gentiles.’ These people will have come from myriad backgrounds, traditions and creeds. Paul is teaching them of Jesus’ way. He is giving them the theology which still governs the church.

This passage could easily be part of a gospel. It takes us right to Jesus talking to the lawyer Matthew 22.36. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: “‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Jesus here quotes the commandments, as he does when talking to the rich young man in Luke 18.

¹⁸ ‘A certain ruler asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: “‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother.” ’ ²¹ He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

This is what Paul is doing: he is quoting Jesus' new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It is central to Jesus' teaching and Paul is reiterating this theme. Everything in the commandments and Jesus' teachings is contained within it. If people did care for one another like that, then humanity would live in respect and harmony. Of course it is an ideal, but so are all Jesus' teachings, but that doesn't mean they are idealistic. They are standards by which we need to try to live.

¹⁰ 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.' (Romans 13)

Matthew has tried to deal with this within the context of the early church and to wrestle with what can be done when people do not adhere to it. Paul uses the metaphor of darkness and light. The old ways, the ways of darkness and wrongdoing have to be put aside now you have accepted the new way, Christ's way, the way of goodness and light. We remember, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.' (John 1.5)

Paul outlines the old way of life that would have been the norm for some of these people. It is time to turn from sin and turn to Christ, or as he puts it, 'it is now the moment to wake from sleep.'

Salvation was won by Jesus and it is his promise to all who truly turn to him but that acceptance or turning has consequences for our lives. Paul is of course also referring to the renewed creation of God which will one day come upon the earth to fulfil Jesus' promise and with Jesus as judge.

It is important that we apply the teachings found in our readings to our own lives and church. We may not 'wallow in drunkenness or revelling' but we do need to ask ourselves what are we doing wrong that Jesus would condemn? No one is without sin, only Jesus.

I have said earlier that a Christian is called to stand up for what is right. to stand in God's strength not just our own,' to put on the armour of light.' We have to remember to do what Jesus wants, not what we want, so we can 'live honourably' according to his teachings.

I have just read a novel, which contains the lines. 'Our lives, our institutions must be governed by the teaching given in Christ's Sermon on the Mount.' If we do that we won't go far wrong.

Each new day of our lives is like a blank page for us to write on, a new day to be lived in Jesus' way.

Lord of the Church; hear us as we look to you for strength, vision and energy in these testing times. Renew your Church throughout the world – and start with us. Amen. John Pritchard.

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