

Manchester United play football rather well. So do Chelsea, Arsenal, Spurs. Chelsea is top of the League. But what about their supporters? When they are known to be coming police leave is cancelled; the mounted police and dog-handlers are specially to the fore: it seems only animals can daunt these fans. Would you blame Chelsea for their supporters? Would you blame Jesus for his supporters?

Jesus of Nazareth is top of the Premiership among human beings, son of the most High. But his supporters: what a lot of trouble they cause; scuffling between themselves, arguing and fighting and often bring disgrace on the name of Christian.

This is not a new fact. We could bring to mind plenty of instances of Christians falling out, quarrelling in public, splitting up into factions, behaving in ways which do not match their Master's example or his teaching – but our instances would come from the present day, or perhaps from the persecutions of the Reformation, the wars of religion, the martyrings of Tyburn and the Tower, the strife of Ireland, even perhaps as far back as the excesses of the Crusades. We would suppose the first Christians enjoyed peace and friendship, influenced as they were by the recent presence of Jesus in the body among them and the amazing experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

I do tend to look back on the early church as a Golden Age, but we can tell from the letters of Paul that there were arguments and blemishes in the early Church as today. Paul saw the ideal Church, the Christian body as she should be, a perfect Bride for Christ who 'loved the Church and gave himself up for it, to consecrate and cleanse it by water and word, so that he might present the church to himself all glorious, with no stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish.' (Ephesians 5:25-27) – But he was not blind to the Church's splits and faults, the blemishes and stains which needed to be removed.

Matthew, too, was aware of the state of the Church as it existed in his own day and he wrote for the real church he knew, not an ideal he would have liked to know. In the church for which he wrote for - the real, not the ideal - church there was narrow sectarianism, racial prejudice and disputes which threatened to split congregations. He presented Jesus' teaching addressed to these problems and today we can look at what Matthew published with those he reproduced from Mark or had in common with Luke.

We know Matthew wrote particularly with Jewish readers in mind, with lots of backing from the Old Testament which he knew and loved, but by no means for an exclusively Jewish church. There was a danger that just this sort of church would emerge and we can tell from the Acts of the Apostles that this was a difficult and drawn-out issue for the first generation of Christian leaders. Naturally people brought into the discussion what they remembered Jesus said and did.

But when Matthew wrote our reading for this morning Matthew had before him what is contained in Luke's Gospel chapter 15. The chapter number may not mean anything to you. So let me remind you that it contained the three stories of lost and found: the lost coin, the lost sheep and the two lost sons. You remember Jesus told those stories to defend himself against criticism of his welcoming and eating with tax-collectors and sinners.

Here Matthew visits that part of the Jesus story but he makes of it something relevant to knotty problems in the church life of the generation that came after. Paul's letters to Corinthians, his arguments with people in the scattered Mediterranean churches and the episodes recorded in the Acts of the Apostles show us it was not all sweetness and light. Paul had to deal with people who thought they had superior gifts, gifts of strange tongues, miracle working, knowledge of spiritual secrets – and he also had to deal with people who had taken too far his declaration that they were free from the bondage of the law. Matthew's message from Jesus homes in on what happens when your brother Christian does something really out of order; it's a tough message, but Matthew comes at it very gently at first, and follows up with calls to love and forgiveness. But right in the heart of this chapter he confronts the implacable wrongdoer head-on and says that in the last resort you have to expel that person and treat them as an outsider. Can this be a Christian message? Can there be irreparable breaches in the church? Well, yes there can, and sometimes there must. Here I stand, I can no other, said Martin Luther and the European Reformation followed, with division which has lasted four and three quarter centuries.

Is there behaviour by Christians in the church which is intolerable? Yes there is. There has been abuse, secret and vile; there has been violence, covered up and sustained in domestic settings; there has been fraud; treasurers have been caught with their hands in the till. There have also been people with principles which are hard to reconcile and some people with principles who try to force them on others or on the whole body. And people who appear to be high minded, but actually ride rough-shod over the principles of others. They tell those others that their principles are worthless, their scruples mere fancies. They would tell the teetotaler he should drink, the chaste she should have sex, people of pure speech they should blaspheme, vegetarians they should eat meat, good stewards that they should gamble and simple believers in scripture that it ain't necessarily so.

What Matthew was facing up to these people in the Church he brought forward some of Jesus' angriest words and some of his gentlest, demanding radical demanding mercy.

Matthew 18:1-4

The 18th chapter starts with leadership and the child – unless you turn round and become like a child you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That lays the foundation, challenges all sophistication and knowingness, pride and self-satisfaction: it demands humility.

Matthew 18:5-10

Then the wording changes: it's all about those who cause the little ones to stumble. Vicious words about the corrupters of children - or are they about people who assail simple faith, who mock the moral rules and norms that guide our lives? If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble – why it was better they had the great weight of a mill-stone slung round their necks and they were thrown into the sea. Those little ones, whether they are children or simple Christians, have angels in heaven who are constantly in the presence of their heavenly Father. There is much rejoicing in heaven when a little lost one is found – as Jesus in Luke tells us there is rejoicing when the woman finds her tiny lost coin. But the word for putting a stone in the way for a little one to trip over is a word we know: in Greek *skandalizo* – to scandalize. Scandal sounds like exciting gossip to us now: but it meant that which trips up other people. Don't despise these little child-like ones.

Matthew 18:12-14

Here Matthew brings in the lost sheep almost as we hear it in Luke. 99 are left in the fields while the good shepherd seeks the little lost one. But the follow up is a little different: "In the same way, it is not your heavenly Father's will that one of these little ones should be lost." (v14) The thrust is still Christ's concern for the little ones. After the lost coin and the lost sheep (*in Luke's Gospel, chapter 15*) come the two brothers – both lost in their own way, one in the far country in selfish debauchery, the other in prickly, priggish, bitter self-righteousness. When the wandering son comes home repentant his elder brother could not even recognize him as a brother, saying to his Father "this son of yours".

Matthew 18:15-17

How does Jesus say quarreling brothers should deal with their issues: "If your brother does wrong, go and take the matter up with him, strictly between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." (vv15,16) Of course this is not just about brother's family quarrels; it is about fellow-Christians (brothers and sisters). It is more than your personal reconciliation. And it means winning back to the church a professing disciple who stands in danger of forfeiting salvation through sin against a fellow-disciple. "But if he will not listen, take one or two others with you, so that [here he quotes Deuteronomy 19 in the Old Testament, familiar to Jesus' Jewish audience and Matthew's Jewish readers but maybe known as a legal principle by others too]. You bring in the companions "so that every case may be settled on the evidence of two or three witnesses." But it is not only getting the facts established and the evidence confirmed. It is also an opportunity to use the help of others so that you may both be reasonable. "If he refuses to listen to them, report the matter to the congregation". This place in Matthew 18, verse 17 is where the word for the church congregation *ekklesia* comes into the Bible. An old word for the congregation of Israel but now to be understood as the gathering of Jesus' disciples. Here is the beginning of Church Meeting. The teaching of Jesus must be seen as pointing forward to the time when he would not be present to knock their heads together. Take it to the church. "and if he will not listen even to the congregation, then treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector." Extra-ordinary words. Treat him as an ethnic – the word was used to mean 'Gentile' – non-Jew originally. The translation 'pagan' seeks to adapt the meaning to the Christian situation where many believers are non-Jews. Treat him like one of the ungodly, and outsider, or treat him like Jews treat tax-collectors because of their unscrupulous tendencies but above all their collaboration with the colonial power. Today is racial justice Sunday so we need to witness against treating people like foreigners or ethnic. We need to take seriously, nonetheless, the implication of these words that unreconciled individuals do have to be put outside, expelled, ostracized. Tough measures, to be used sparingly. Approached with care and humility, remembering Jesus' care to seek and save the lost, weighed up seriously, aware how evil it is to bring vulnerable ones to ruin, meeting one-to-one, bringing in a couple of others and only if unresolved going to the church in meeting.

Matthew 18:18-20

Beyond this Matthew's Gospel repeats and confirms what was said to Peter about the consequence in heaven of what they do in church on earth: should there be reconciliation and forgiveness on earth, it is echoed in heaven. And you don't just bring two brothers together to confirm the truth of an accusation; when two agree one earth about what they request in his name. What name? that name Matthew tells us about at the beginning: Immanuel: God is with us. God being with us makes church life and church action really significant.

Matthew 18:21-22

And you are to forgive one another – the chapter goes on with the most compelling of all Jesus' parables about the need to forgive our fellow-servants of God. Whatever you go away with today, don't go away with

the idea the church is judgemental, unforgiving, hard. It's gentle, loving, humble and open to repentance on which we all depend. But the church is not to be trifled with, the simple little folk are not to be despised, the weak are not to be tripped up, the enemy of faith may need to be expelled and the church will not be afraid to face up to its responsibilities.

Jesus is Lord. No question that makes church a serious place. It is no game. Nor is it a voluntary organization. We are here as a matter of obedience. Our meeting is not for us to express our preferences. It is to seek the mind of Christ. Let that mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was on a par with God humbled himself, emptied himself, made himself nothing.

May God bless and guide all our thoughts about his Word, may he bless our living this week, may he strengthen our love for our fellow-believers and may he bring us to appreciate their faith, their principles and callings. For Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it that he might present it to himself faultless, without spot or wrinkle. May we be changed by Christ that we – imperfect as we are – become like that.

Amen