

SJM, 16th Aug 2017

The Perfect Church

Matthew 18 v15-20

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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. 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. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

I'd like to start by reading you a short poem entitled 'The Perfect Church':

*I think that I shall never see
A church that's all it ought to be;
A church whose members never stray
Beyond the straight and narrow way!*

*A church that has no empty pews,
Whose pastor never has the blues,
A church whose elders always seek
And none is proud, and all are meek.*

*Where gossips never peddle lies,
Or make complaints and criticize;
Where all are always sweet and kind
And to all others' faults are blind.*

*Such perfect churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.
But still we'll work and pray and plan
To make our own the best we can. Anon.*

How true do you think this poem is in relation to life here in SJM? Is it all sweetness and light or are you aware of some divisions, some ill-feelings, some history of "he once did this... she once said that?" I suspect the poem is quite true to life.

In the gospel passage Jesus himself acknowledges that things won't always bob along peacefully and he gives instructions on how to 'win back a brother' or 'make a friend' or in our version 'regain that one.' And he teaches that we should all look out for one another. If someone upsets you, if someone does something wrong, don't mutter under your breath and seethe, don't be like a pressure cooker quietly hissing away letting it all build up without venting the hurt or the embarrassment or the anger. Don't pretend problems don't exist because they do – we are not yet perfect. That may come as a surprise to some of you. You're not yet perfect, you are a work in progress and we all need to have our edges knocked off, *lovingly*, now and again.

And there's the rub. Look at the passages either side of our gospel message today: the parable of the lost sheep where God is depicted as a shepherd who goes out of his way to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. He doesn't grunt, kick off his boots muttering about how stupid or blind or how much trouble that little sheep is. No, he goes out again, in search, brings it back home and rejoices. And immediately after Jesus story, Peter jumps in, being really practical with the question, 'How often should I forgive?' The answer seventy times seven really means without end. Your patience, love and concern for fellow Christians should be like this – endless. Like the love of God for us.

Please note that God went out after the sheep that had strayed, he didn't sit and wait for it to make the return journey. If there are Christians out there who have stopped coming – go and find them. Go, go, go. So how do you treat those who refuse to listen? As an outcast? A tax-collector? How did Jesus treat the tax-collector? He went to him! Don't be fooled into thinking Jesus was being

hard on those who had strayed. He was actually being hard on those who remain. It's their job, it's my job, it's your job *to go* and preach healing and wholeness and forgiveness.

So let's hear the ending to this poem again, 'The Perfect Church':

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A church that's all it ought to be;
A church whose members never stray
Beyond the straight and narrow way!*

*But still we'll work and pray and plan
To make our own the best we can.*

<http://goandmake.ca/%e2%80%9con-going-love%e2%80%9d-a-sermon-on-matthew-1815-20/>