

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

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**FOR WHERE TWO OR THREE
ARE GATHERED IN
MY NAME,
THERE AM I AMONG THEM.
-MATTHEW 18:20**

**TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME**

6th September 2026

Matt. 18:15 Jesus said to his disciples: "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. ¹⁶ 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. 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

There is a bit of a problem with the NRSV translation. The Greek original does not use language like "member" and "church", which can make the text reflect a much later institutional development. Instead, the Greek says (as in traditional versions) "brother", bearing in mind that in Greek "brother" in this context means a disciple, whether male or female. Likewise, instead of "church" the Greek uses "assembly", a very ordinary word meaning any kind of official gathering of a group. That is why, for instance, Paul always says "the church of God", lit. the "assembly of God" to make it clear we are dealing with a gathering of believers and not just any gathering. So, Matthew did not write "member of the church", simply "brother". Neither did he write "church", but simply "assembly"—the NJB gets it right, although it does not succeed in inclusive language. "Member of the family of God" would be correct but perhaps cumbersome.

It is not historically probable that Jesus instructed the disciples to treat fellow-believers as tax collectors and sinners, with the meaning of excommunication. Jesus' practice is precisely the opposite, to include tax collectors and sinners. It would seem, therefore, that here we have a local development designed to deal with a new situation—hardened, unrepentant sinners within the community—with appropriate procedures, expressed unfortunately in language which takes us back to attitudes which pre-date the ministry of Jesus. Where the Holy Spirit is in all this is anyone's guess!!!

KIERAN O'MAHONY OSA - www.tarsus.ie

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. At the time Matthew was writing his gospel local church communities would have numbered no more than fifty people. They would be known to one another. Matthew presents the instructions of Jesus for dealing with people whose behaviour disrupted and harmed the community. Note the steps suggested. Simple directions but many of us do otherwise. We avoid difficult confrontations. We talk about the faults of others to everyone but themselves. We go over the head of someone who displeases us and make complaints. In your experience, which approach is life-giving for you and for others?
2. While Jesus is referring to a group situation, the advice can be applied also to personal difficulties and problems with others. What lessons has life taught you about constructive ways of dealing with conflict?
3. As individuals and communities we have the power to bind and to loose, to exclude people from relationship, or to open up and include others in relationship. When have you found it important to acknowledge this power in your own life?
4. Jesus also promises to be with his followers when they gather together. What does that mean to you? How have you experienced the presence of Jesus in his followers gathered together? During the recent lockdown due to the coronavirus, how did you experience the presence of Jesus in your faith community?

JOHN BYRNE OSA - Intercom

A SPACE CREATED BY JESUS

Matthew's Jesus says "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." In Jesus' Church people don't come together out of habit, inertia, or fear. His followers are to "gather in his name", be converted to him, feed on his gospel. That is also our first task, even if there are only two or three of us.

To gather in Jesus' name is to create a space for living our whole existence around him. within his horizon. A spiritual place not defined by doctrines, customs or practices but by the Spirit of Jesus, who helps us to live in his way.

The telling of the gospel is at the centre of this "Jesus space". That is the essential experience of every Christian community: we do it "in memory of Jesus", recalling his words, accepting them with faith and living them with joy. The art of accepting the gospel in the context of our lives brings us into contact with Jesus, and gives us the experience of growing as his disciples and followers.

This space, dominated by Jesus, is the first thing we need to protect, consolidate and deepen in our communities and parishes. Let us be clear about this. The renewal of the Church always begins in the heart of two or three believers, gathering in the name of Jesus.

HELPING ONE ANOTHER TO BECOME BETTER

Today more than ever, we believers need to hear Jesus' call to change our ways and help one another to become better. Jesus invites us to take action patiently and unhurriedly, going to the one who needs correction in personal, friendly way. "If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one!"

That kind of friendly, loyal criticism, that timely intervention, that sincere support at a time of disorientation, can be helpful to us all. Everyone is capable of turning away from sin and returning to reason and kindness. But people often need to hear from someone who truly loves them, who invites them to think about what they are doing, who passes on to them a new desire for truth and generosity.

Perhaps what causes most people to change is not a great idea or a beautiful thought, but an encounter with someone who has gone to them in friendship and helped them to become new.

JOSÉ A PAGOLA - The Way Opened up by Jesus

Today's gospel deals with the person who has sinned and is still part of the community. The tone of the advice is very pastoral, showing concern for everyone involved. It is only as a last resort that a decision should be taken to excommunicate anyone. There is a certain irony in the language here for they are told to treat the offender like a tax collector or a sinner. In Jesus' ministry these are the people to whom he has consistently reached out. The basis for every decision the community takes must be the conviction that Jesus is with them when they gather, even if only two or three of them are present. This is in contrast to the teaching of the rabbis that requires that ten men be present before the prayers can begin.

SEAN GOAN - Let the Reader Understand

As usual with lectio divina, we do not moralise. The conclusion of our teaching is not 'Jesus tells us to do this', but 'Let us celebrate Jesus at work in the world. We recognise moments of grace when we ourselves lived this teaching, and celebrate the great people who by word and example taught you how to live it.

The passage is in two sections; the teaching (vv.15-17), and the spiritual foundation to the teaching (vv.18-20). It is a good example of biblical teaching - practical moral teaching based on spirituality.

The quotation from Deuteronomy (v.16) must be interpreted correctly. The setting of the teaching is not a court of law, but a human community. Jesus is merely drawing an analogy - just as in a court the prosecution needs help, we too need help in settling community conflicts.

The reference to 'pagans and tax collectors' is strange when we remember Jesus' special care for these two groups. We can however take the expression as it stands, referring it to those whom the community has a right to exclude. In the light of Jesus' other teaching, some would add, 'remember you have to reach out to them also'.

v. 19 means that God knows what we are really trying to do when we decide to exclude a member of our community. He will not necessarily accept our verdict, but he will look with approval at the ideal we want to affirm.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL - Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels

Today's gospel reminds us that there are moments when we must speak the truth in love for the greater good. The Season of Creation presents us with such a moment, where we can create awareness across our communities so that together we can discern how to care more deeply for God's creation. For this is our common home, the home we all share. We are not alone, Christ is with us along this journey. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Ecological conversion involves a profound movement of the heart where our relationship with God's creation is concerned. This week, spend more time in nature in deeper awareness of the beauty of our world."

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT - Go Deeper