

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Fr Peter Groves

Reading

Matthew 18.15-20 Church

*“Where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I in the midst of them” Matt 18.20*

These last few weeks and months, the word “church” has been on my mind even more than usual, were that possible. There are, of course, several different senses in which we use that word, and the most important distinction is expressed for most people by our choice of article, definite or indefinite. “The church” tends to refer to a theological concept, and “a church” tends to refer to a building. Though that’s not quite good enough. We as the worshipping community of St Mary Magdalen’s are very much “a church”, and the fact that we are not restricted to a building is

demonstrated for all to see by our being here this morning, and worshipping as a church in a building which is not our own. Likewise, when church buildings are the centre of our attention, as ours has to be for the churchwardens and myself at present, when we talk about “the church” to one another, we are probably talking about the physical building which is undergoing restoration. Although things continue to go well, and the physical transformation of our interior especially becomes more and more apparent, it is hard not to be weighed down by anxiety about how long things will last and when we will be able to return, when, in other words, the church can come back to the church.

The word church features rarely in the New Testament. In the gospels it occurs only in Matthew, and only in two places – used once when Jesus says to Peter “on this rock I shall build my church”, and twice in the passage we heard from

Matthew 18. The Greek word which we translate as church derives from a word indicating those who are “called out”, and actually means something like “meeting” or “assembly”. It’s a nice irony I think that the only one of the many churches in Oxford which doesn’t call itself a church – the Quaker Meeting House – is the only one whose designation is a good literal translation of the word “ekklesia”.

The word church is used differently in the New Testament by different writers in different contexts. When Jesus says to Peter “on this rock I shall build my church” he is speaking of some future Christian community. When, as in our gospel, he gives practical instructions about how to deal with someone who has wronged you, he is talking about the particular local Christian grouping. In the Acts of the Apostles, church is both the local community and the wider movement we call Christianity. When Paul says church he

means similar local communities, but he also expands this idea and enriches it. The local church is the embodiment of the universal church, and the members of the church form the members of the body which is the corporate presence of Christ on earth. In the epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians this idea has come further, so that Christ is explicitly described as the head of the Church which is his body.

In none of these examples does the word church mean building. Our earliest possible evidence for buildings we might call churches comes from the third century, and that evidence is partial, probably showing the adaptation of existing buildings rather than new constructions. Nevertheless, the New Testament – I Corinthians and Hebrews in particular – does give us a significant sense of church – ecclesia – not as any old assembly, but as the Christian community assembled for worship. The distance between the

Biblical use and our own is hence not as great as we might think.

Our different Christian ideas of church are often before our very eyes in the architectures which house particular theologies. If church is nothing other than an assembly met together, I don't need anything more than a meeting house. My church, or chapel, will be simple, with an emphasis on accommodating lots of people and directing them all towards the point from which the scripture will be read. If, on the other hand, my understanding of church is something more like that of the mystical body of Christ, then my church building is likely to have a great emphasis on the Christian past, and on the present reality of sacramental worship as well as the reading of scripture and the proclamation of the gospel. If you wanted an example of such a building now and in England, you could not do better than look around you at

this glorious chapel, a monument to the catholic faith as understood within the Church of England.

When Jesus instructs his disciples in the practical realities of Christian living, we should remember that that is what the church is all about. If we human beings were good at living in direct and close relationship with God, we would need no help. But we are not. God in Christ has given us the church to be his body on earth precisely so as to help us be disciples, to help us learn what it means to live the Christian life. The structures of prayer and worship which we call our liturgies are the corporate attempt to do what Christ requires us all to do – attend to the presence of God in our lives, and acknowledge our creator and redeemer in worship, and allow him to unite our lives with his through transforming creation in the day to day miracles that we call the Christian sacraments.

In Matthew 18, Jesus invites us to speak to our neighbour when conflict or problem arise. If we are successful, he does not say that our neighbour will have gained forgiveness. He says to us that we will have gained, have won, our neighbour. In other words, our act of reconciliation gives something to us just as much as it gives something to our brother. This simple truth is a pointer to an entire doctrine of the church. To be a Christian is to know that life is about more than simply here and now and me and mine. Being baptised into the body of Christ, I can no more live in isolation than I can nullify the love and the grace of God. Belonging to Christ and belonging to the church are one and the same.