

‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’
(Mt 18.20)

It is wonderful to be back here worshipping together for the first time since mid-March.

But I don’t think I would have chosen today’s lectionary readings for this occasion! St Paul’s letter to the Romans warns against revelling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy. The reading from Matthew’s gospel is about arguments in church communities.

Goodness. We’ve only just got back together. Do we really need that kind of advice now?

Well, we know from the New Testament epistles that the early Christian churches argued about all sorts of things and that church communities have continued to have their disagreements down the centuries. The gospel passage does contain some very practical and straightforward advice, so what can we learn?

First of all, we shouldn’t pretend there isn’t a problem – simply papering over the cracks. That won’t do. It is important to address the problem directly.

It is less clear what should happen if the offender refuses to listen even to the church assembly. Jesus says ‘let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.’ Does this mean that the offender should be excluded?

That might be the case if (in the case of real evil) someone refused to yield and be reconciled.

But Matthew’s readers would have known that Jesus made a habit of welcoming Gentiles and tax collectors and a range of other people who

were excluded or treated as second class citizens in the society of his day. These were the people Jesus had come for and he brought about their healing and restoration to the society which had excluded them. He was giving his contemporaries a vision of the kingdom of God, of people living together in a new and better way.

As Jesus continued with his teaching, he made the famous promise: ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Mt 18.20).

Jesus promises to be with us, not just with us in our prayer and worship, but in our difficulties and conflicts. That should give us encouragement and hope. It is also a warning. Jesus will see and know the innermost truth of everyone’s heart.

His aim is to draw us together more deeply into the love of God. Can we learn to disagree in a more loving way? The church can then model a kinder and more thoughtful approach to conflict, which honours the image of God in everyone. **Amen**