



## **Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them**

**A sermon by Revd Richard Carter**

**Readings: Ezekiel 33.7-11; Romans 13.8-end; Matthew 18.15-20**

For those of us who gathered in this church yesterday to celebrate the marriage of two of our much loved younger members of the congregation Helen and Adrian, those words of Jesus really came true. There was quite simply in the preparation, celebration and thanksgiving a real sense of God's presence. In fact it was far more than two or three gathered in Christ's name, much more like 180 but as I reflected upon the day what struck me was the way that celebration had gathered people. Gathered the couple Helen and Adrian in love and commitment, gathered their families and all their friends together in celebration from Scotland to London. They could have just paid for the food to be brought in, but no Anna and her team gathered together - spent a lot of the week preparing and all of Friday cooking and making home-made food. For music we could have played a CD, but for the wedding there was much excitement in the gathering together of choir and friends as vocalist, drummer and guitarist. We could have just had the bride and groom turn up in jeans, sign the register and all gone home, posted a general thank you on Facebook: instead of course there was the most beautiful gathering - words, prayers and music and the signs and symbols of love - there was the wedding dress, bridesmaid dresses and hired suits and sunflowers, wedding rings, champagne, food, cake, home-made chocolate éclairs, speeches and toasts and finally a ceilidh which weaved everyone together in the most wonderfully joyful dance. There's no fast food here, no express delivery, no fast track check in, no computer instant access. What a wedding like this is building is relationship, community, interaction, whether it be the vows to become one that the bride and groom take or the transportation and assembling of a wedding cake - we are celebrating covenant - relationship with one another and with God. This is perhaps the best possible example in our own culture of what the South Africans call Ubuntu: "I am what I am because of who we all are." We are human not in isolation but because of the way we interact - because of our shared humanity. Desmond Tutu speaks of this life giving Ubuntu when we are open and available to others, affirming of others, when we do not feel fearful or threatened by others - based on the knowledge that we belong to a greater whole, belong to God.

Certainly at a wedding like yesterday we enter into the joy of being more human together. And that sense that Christ is there at the centre. But if you think about it the Church is one of the few places that celebrates that sense of solidarity, not based on financial considerations like if we stay together we will retain the pound, but based on the revelation that we are all, all sons and daughters of God, no longer strangers and aliens but one in Christ. As Paul says to the Ephesians: "God has broken down the dividing wall - that is the hostility between us - that he might create in himself one new humanity thus making peace." Today's Epistle to the Romans is a call to love your neighbour as yourself - to wake up to the reality of God's presence among us. And this Eucharist is an expression of that gathering - that we are many parts of one body sharing one bread and that together we are called to be sacrament - the outward visible sign of God's love. God's presence in the world.

In the western world we define ourselves far too frequently not collectively, or as a community, but as individuals, separated from one another, in competition with one another, judged by one another. Have you ever noticed that on an English beach in the summer everyone is marking out their own territory, building fences with windbreaks, through the use of towels and deck chairs and little tents - creating private plots to limit interaction with others on the beach. Contrast this with Greek beaches where everyone seems to stand around on the beach and in groups standing in the

sea seemingly having endless extended conversations. Our emphasis in the United Kingdom is so much more on self-sufficiency, self-reliance, independence, private space, personal ownership, your own house - semi-detached, or best of all, fully detached. We protect our boundaries, fear involvement or becoming dependent. A large number of people no longer know their neighbours. What is more a large number of interactions when they do take place no longer take place in the presence of the other but in cyberspace, on mobile phones, iPad and computers. I think one of the great costs of this is the loss of intergenerational interaction. Children who spend hours of time in their bedrooms communicating in texts and twitters and e-mails and interactive computer-games, but no longer speaking face to face, no longer even eating together, or meeting the guest: no longer present physically, in body, spirit and soul to the meeting with God in one another.

I am not suggesting that we all need constant social interaction, heaven forbid, it would drive you mad - I am not saying we do not need space or solitude or time for the individual encounter but the Gospel is saying that when two or three are gathered together in Christ's name Christ is present in the midst. When I was young I remember a Franciscan Brother - saying every house, every group of brothers, every community he joined was never quite right. Eventually someone had said to him: "Brother your perfect community does not exist." Actually living with others is learning to live with imperfection, their imperfection but also acknowledging our own. The same is true of a church. I have often heard people leaving a church because they didn't agree with some of the other people in it. But isn't that the point of what a church is. We are not joining a club of the likeminded or simply sharing a pastime like golf, or the company of those of similar age or political persuasion. Quite the opposite, the two or three or more who are gathered in Christ's name may come from completely different circumstances, opinions, cultures, sexualities, and backgrounds. That is why we are there to live together with difference-to be transformed. Anyone can love their friend or the likeminded, what we are actually called to love is our neighbour as ourselves. Somehow through God's presence in our midst this community becomes possible. We transform one another. We become light for one another, the yeast for one another the makes the whole dough rise. We are enhanced by each other's giftedness, we share the burden of each other's needs.

Our Gospel today acknowledges what it means to live as community. It recognises that we get stuff wrong. Even the first Christian communities were not "sugar and spice and all things nice." There were conflicts, there were mistakes and sins committed then as now which affected the whole body. A Christian community is not defined by its total peace and harmony but by the way it deals with the tensions and difficulties of living together as God's people. Conflict happens. The question is will we let it poison us, divide and destroy us? Will we allow it to escalate and grow like a cancer affecting everything? Or will we find ways of living together whereby we allow ourselves to be transformed by the mercy and love of God?

The Gospel today sets out not a method of accusation but a path to reconciliation when conflict within a community takes place. It is practical, proportional advice. If someone sins against you first speak to them face to face, talk, communicate explain the difference, listen.

If there is no progress and you are not listened to, take two or three witnesses with you and only then if the person still refuses to listen or to speak - take it to the church.

If the offender refuses to listen to the church then, says Jesus, let that one be to you as a Gentile or tax collector. But how did Jesus himself treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Were they not the very ones he searched for and who searched him out and became signs or witnesses of healing and forgiveness? You may think if only... and see a world in which such a path seems impossibly naïve. And yet is it so naïve? In South Africa I remember the white government saying they would never interact or negotiate with the ANC, it was a terrorist organisation they claimed, failing to acknowledge their own acts of terrorism. It was only in face to face meeting between Mandela, the ANC and de Klerk's government that hope was born. Look at Northern Ireland. How many of you

can remember the British government saying that they would never negotiate with terrorists in Northern Ireland but has not the very inclusion of Sinn Fein and hard line unionists led to peace? I remember when the country I was living in, Melanesia, divided in hatred, prejudice and violence, it was a group of unarmed Christians - Melanesian Brothers who held out against the fighting - refused to divide on ethnic lines, without weapons and seemingly without political power they became the hope of the nation. Christianity is not a private thing. You can't do it completely alone. When evil happens we often feel powerless, alienated, divided, cut off from all support. It is facing persecution and loss that those first two or three disciples gathered together in Christ's name and together discovered his real presence among them. Can we do the same? Can we in our gatherings be transformed in the encounter with God and stranger? Can we find the courage and generosity of heart to stick it out, remain faithful even in the midst of the storm of conflict?

When someone suffers or is murdered, or tortured, or bombed or beheaded we are all diminished. The plight of persecuted Christians in Iraq or Yazidis, or Kurds or Muslims is our plight too. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Can we pray, act, give not only for ourselves but for our brothers and sisters in Iraq, in Syria or wherever they may be? I wonder, can we through our faith not seek simply a safe congenial space for ourselves but a church without walls: a church which discovers its own poverty before God and rediscovers that it is in this solidarity with our neighbour that we will find Christ?