

PRAYING AND FORGIVENESS

Alnham, Trinity 16 - 7 September 2008

We have a reading from Matthew this evening. You will be bored when I say this, but it bears repeating, the gospel, indeed any reading in the Bible, has to be read with an eye to the circumstances in which it was written. So let's have a quick look at the situation Matthew was in when he wrote his Gospel. He wrote, we believe, after the revolt against Rome by some Jews in AD 70. It was quite a large up-rising and the Roman answer involved the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (and Herod's refurbishment had only been finished a few years ago) and a major attempt by the occupying forces to drive out Judaism altogether. This Roman effort served only to reinforce the Jewish religion and within that, it was the Pharisees who emerged dominant.

They started a process which was to allow Judaism to continue and even thrive after defeat. They appealed to ancient history and managed to get the worship of Jahweh transferred from the temple to the synagogues. They worked hard to promote unity by collecting and writing down all the laws and traditions which were only in the heads of the rabbis. This is so like the activity of the scribes on the banks of the river Chebar in captivity in Babylon. A sort of back to basics exercise. They set up a standard calendar for the religious year, and tried to transfer rites previously performed in the temple itself to the synagogue.

So in Matthew's time, a highly self-conscious and probably aggressive Pharisaism was asserting itself to reunite Israel. One of the best ways of getting unity as many political leaders have found, is to create an enemy to unite **against**. This is where the systematic persecution of Christians began. There was a determined attempt to keep Judaism for properly believing Jews, and only them.

Matthew's Christian community was mainly Jewish convert. They had to find a way of living with this new aggressive form of Judaism. This explains all the references in the Gospel to 'the scribes and pharisees'. Scholars disagree whether Matthew's Christian community was still trying to live and worship inside formal Judaism or whether it had recently declared itself independent. But, whatever the exact status of Matthew's little community of Christian believers was, it seems clear that they are trying to distance themselves from the synagogue regime. This is why we get the name 'church' used for the first time. It differentiates a worshipping group from the synagogue.

Of course, the Jewish opposition not only unified the Jews, it strengthened and unified the Christians too. But Christians cannot completely separate themselves from their Jewish roots. The early church proclaimed that Jesus the Jew was the logical fulfilment of all the Old Testament. And in Matthew's gospel great stress is placed on the need for unity, and this is where our Gospel reading today fits in.

To keep unity means forgiving those who are disruptive. Forgiveness up to seven times is advised in **Luke**, but 'seventy times (and) seven' in **Mt 18:22**. Matthew, possibly more than in any other ancient document, shows sensitivity to the desperate need for love and peace rather than hate and vengeance. Matthew is trying to reconcile the Jews in their new aggressive identity (which Jesus probably wouldn't have recognised) with the Christian

church. Jesus tried to preserve both the old and establish the new. While he called for a mission to Gentiles in the great command to go and preach the good news to all nations, he also recognized Israel's special place and insisted on the demands for a righteousness even higher than that of the Pharisees. The proof of Matthew's ecumenical character is that both Jewish and Gentile Christians welcomed it as their own: it became the chief gospel of both groups.

With that bit of background we come to our passage. Matt. 18:19 is an assurance that God will answer prayer. Such assurances occur frequently in the Jesus tradition, especially in John. The promise of Christ's presence, (where 2 or 3 are gathered in - or better unto - my name etc) is one of those Jesus sayings that was almost certainly given to the disciples in the time between the Resurrection and the Ascension. But Matthew advances it to before the crucifixion. Why? It is the fulfilment of the Immanuel quotation from Isa. 7:14 in the birth narrative "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." This assurance is put here because church discipline must be exercised in the context of prayer.

It is interesting to note that the way the words of verse 20 for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." are constructed closely parallels a rabbinic saying about the Torah: "If two or three sit together and the words of the Law are spoken between them, the Divine Presence rests between them" (*m. 'Abot 3:2*).

How do the disciples gather "in the name of Jesus"? The rabbinic saying helps us to interpret it. The rabbis gathered to study the Torah; Matthew intends his Christians to gather to study the Torah, yea, but Torah as fulfilled by Jesus. Again, Matthew has his eye on the synagogue "across the street." They think they have God's presence. And Matthew assures his community that it is the risen Christ who is Immanuel, God **present** with the community.

This promise is placed in the context of church unity and church discipline. Church discipline must be administered with the prayerful study of Jesus' teaching—as given in the discourses of Matthew's Gospel. In such a context, the decisions of the community will be legally binding.

And what does Jesus teach about prayer? He says that, if two upon earth agree upon any matter for which they are praying, they will receive it from God. If we take that literally, and without any qualification, it is not true is it? How often have two people agreed to pray for the physical or the spiritual welfare of a loved one - only to find that their prayer has not, in the literal sense, been answered. How often have two or more of us prayed for peace, or growth of the church and so on, only to see no result in terms that we were hoping for. People agree to pray, and pray desperately and urgently and do not receive what they are praying for. We really must face up to this. What Jesus says here is not LITERALLY true.

So what is he saying? William Barclay says that we can learn 3 important truths.

First and foremost, it means that prayer must never be selfish and that selfish prayer cannot find an answer. We are not meant to pray only for our own needs, thinking of nothing and no one but ourselves; we are meant to pray as members of a fellowship, in agreement, remembering that life and the world are not arranged for us as individuals but for the fellowship as a whole. It would often happen that, if our prayers were answered, the prayers of someone else would be disappointed. Often our prayers for our success would necessarily involve someone else's failure. Effective prayer must be the prayer of agreement, from which the element of selfish concentration on our own needs and desires has been quite cleansed away.

When prayer is unselfish, it is always answered. But here as everywhere we must remember the basic law of prayer; that law is that in prayer we receive, not the answer which we want, but the answer which God in his wisdom and his love knows to be best. Simply because we are human beings, with human hearts and fears and hopes and desires, most of our prayers are prayers for escape. We pray to be saved from some trial, some sorrow, some disappointment, some hurting and difficult situation. And always God's answer is the offer not of escape, but of victory. God does not give us escape from a human situation; he enables us to accept what we cannot understand; he enables us to endure what without him would be unendurable; he enables us to face what without him would be beyond all facing. The perfect example of all this is Jesus in Gethsemane. He prayed to be released from the dread situation which confronted him, he was not released from it; but he was given power to meet it, to endure it, and to conquer it. When we pray unselfishly, God sends his answer—but the answer is always his answer and not necessarily ours.

And third, Jesus goes on to say that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there in the midst of them. As I said: the Jews themselves had a saying, "Where two sit and are occupied with the study of the Law, the glory of God is among them." We may take this great promise of Jesus into two spheres. He is in huge services and little gatherings. The Lord is here - we always affirm this God-given truth in every Eucharist. He is there wherever faithful believers meet together.

Also the early church applied this truth to the Christian family - who were a little fortress of resurrection faith against the persecution or oppression for outside. One of the earliest interpretations of this saying of Jesus was that *the two or three are father, mother, and child*, and that it means that Jesus is there, the unseen guest in every home.

There are those who never give of their best except on the so-called great occasion; but for Jesus Christ every occasion where even two or three are gathered in his name is a great occasion.

So - where has this got us? Well, two things leap out at me: although we may not be facing active opposition in our faith, we are surrounded by the culture of consumerism, and we are oppressed by apathy. So the gathered community, whether we be few (as we usually are up here in Alnham, or many as in the big Diocesan services, can claim that the Lord really IS here. Jesus said so, and it is therefore true. That empowers and encourages us.

And second we can take comfort that our prayers are answered. They may not be

answered in the way that we might have had in mind when we first came together to pray. Consider this as an example. The church in the valley was trying to face up to the financial constraints placed on it because the Diocese could not afford two paid priests. And I was called to offer to fill at least a part of that gap. And since I have been here we have had Sue ordained, and there is hopefully a further priest in the making. Originally when we prayed, the prayer was probably for more money - and the answer came in a different form.

When we pray for the Christian witness in the Valley, the Lord does not necessarily add to our Church of England numbers, but he helps us work together with the other churches on the valley to provide a stronger and wider witness. In the time I have been here that witness had broadened. We have the Walk of Witness on Good Friday, there are additional Alternative sorts of Public Christian Worship on offer every month. Together we are stronger, we get to know each other better, and then we are able to do bereavement visiting and so on. A different answer, and of course, in every way a better answer.

So when we pray, let's try to be open to all the possibilities that God may have in mind for us/ All things work together for good to those who love God.