

## Trinity 13

Sometimes our translators, in the effort to eliminate bias, lose the point. This has happened in today's gospel. The Greek text reads 'if your brother sins against you', but we've just heard, 'if another member of the church sins against you' (and the word 'member' used twice more).

As Fr John Pridmore writes,

The surgery has worked: the sexist language has been cut out; but the patient has unfortunately also died. The heart of the passage has stopped. An accurately inclusive translation would be 'if your brother or sister sins against you...'

Is this important? Actually, it is. There is all the difference in the world between 'your brother or sister' and 'another member of the church'. If you are my 'brother' or my 'sister' there is an intimate, unbreakable and undeniable personal relationship between us. 'Member of the church' doesn't, in modern English, suggest a personal relationship but a more impersonal affiliation to an institution. It sounds as though Jesus is telling you what to do if you've been upset by someone who's on the local authority electoral roll, or in your gym, or a paid-up fan of the National Gallery. Such social distancing, in our relatedness in Christ, is not commended.

The Church is not primarily an organization, and where it appears to be one it is not a very efficient one. Jesus teaches us that it is a *family*, brothers and sisters to whom we owe a family loyalty. As in a family, our loyalty is not *conditional*: there is more to it than cool self-interest, payback, or personal advantage; but it is also not *uncritical*. The Church is dysfunctional in the ways that families are: it always needs hard work to keep the relationships alive.

So this verse doesn't address us as members of an institution. And Matthew does mention something called 'the Church', but not here. He alone among the gospel writers uses the word 'church', *ekklesia*, meaning 'meeting' or 'gathered assembly'. This word is used of the gathering of the people of God in the Old Testament and Matthew uses it to denote the 'New Israel' which Jesus founded (we heard it when he commended Peter's faith two weeks ago – 'on this rock I will build my church'). He does use the word 'church' a few verses later in the reading we've just heard ('tell it to the church', 18.17): that may be what seduced our translators into using it here.

The difficulty is ours: we too readily view the Church as a voluntary association rather than a family. But because we do that it is important to get this right, and to recall that when we speak of the Church we don't mean a *thing*; it isn't synods or dioceses, or diocesan office in Causton St: Jesus defines it for us at the end of this Gospel:

'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

That's very much to the point when we celebrate a human life-event as we're doing with Judith and Joe this morning. Judith has been part of this church family from birth, and Joe and Charlotte were confirmed here. In celebrating 25 years of marriage we aren't suggesting that they are perfect, or that everything about those years has been easy. We are thanking God that they *belong*, together and to us, and asking his blessing on this family for all that lies ahead for them, and for us all, together.