

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

As we have journeyed together with the Jesus of Matthew's gospel we have glimpsed how the Jewish people began to understand their faith differently; how their faith was reframed in a radically new way. In recent weeks listening to Matthew we have heard a new word enter into the gospel lexicon, of all the evangelists only Matthew mentions the word Church. The idea of Church has tended to divide us. Are we the pilgrim 'People of God' or 'the Body of Christ?' The truth is we must be both. You might recall Canon Scott reminding us of the scholar who wrote: *Jesus announced the kingdom, and it is the Church that came.* I am convinced of the view that through the Church we glimpse the kingdom, as I reminded you all recently, it is through the natural first that we view the spiritual, Church is about the reconciliation of earth and the heaven.

So back to Matthew: scholars tell us that clearly when Jesus used the word 'ecclesia' he didn't envisage the Church as we have it today and there is truth in that, but it's not the whole story. I don't think it is stretching things too far at all to suggest that as Jesus moved around Judea and folk gathered and listened and as the first hearers of the gospel gathered and listened there would have been these little cells forming, folk living in a particular way, a striking new way, a way that at its heart involved forgiveness and reconciliation. This is Matthew's ecclesia.

Over these past weeks we have heard a little of what that means for us to be 'Church' in this Matthean way. We were challenged: Are we simply admirers of Jesus or at one with him in the cross? And last week we considered the vexing topic of authority. This morning's gospel is made all the more extraordinary when read in light of last Sunday's passage about the way that we in the Church understand authority. What extraordinary authority this is, because when we look at the gospels we can see that *forgiveness* is the way in which this authority is exercised. When Jesus offers healing and forgiveness the crowds, we are told, are in awe because of his authority, but for the religious 'authorities' such authority is reserved for God alone and Jesus is condemned for using it.

We, the Church, reveal our authority by our acts of forgiveness or perhaps better still when we live in such a way that forgiveness is our *raison d'être*. Where has this authority come from? Well its genesis is at the very heart of our faith, because it is all about the resurrection. When the risen Jesus comes into the presence of the disciples his very first words are 'do not be afraid' and 'peace be with you': they are words of assurance, words of forgiveness. Joseph, in this morning's reading, had every reason to bear a grudge against his brothers who thought him dead. He called his son Manasseh, 'one who causes to be forgotten.' Jesus is channeling Joseph as he speaks with his disciples: except that unlike Joseph, who says to his brothers: Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Jesus is

saying to those gathered in the upper room who thought him dead: 'Do not be afraid! *I Am* in the place of God. In John's gospel it is in the upper room that the Church is born, Jesus comes among his followers offers them peace, breathes on them and bestows the authority of forgiveness. This is the Church.

And this is exactly what we are doing when we offer each other a sign of God's peace, we are exercising the authority bestowed on us by the risen Christ to offer God's forgiveness. This is quite extraordinary. Whilst the Church has traditionally bestowed authority on priests to absolve through Jesus' words to Peter, John tells us that such authority is given to all.

So what does that look like this authority, this divine forgiveness mediated through us, through the Church? Paul gives us a hint this morning in that forgiveness is not a matter of strength, this is not authority in the way that we generally understand it. Neither does forgiveness involve judgement. Indeed if we offer forgiveness, there is a sense that we must seek it too. Simone Weil in typically enigmatic fashion once said 'I also am other that what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.' The closing words of the Rite of Reconciliation in our Prayer Book has the priest address the penitent: 'Go in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins, and pray for me a sinner.' Forgiveness as we saw in this morning's gospel is gift, we can see this in the gospels whenever Jesus exercises his authority, he gives something of himself away and the shadow of cross deepens; forgiveness is gifted, sacrificial, it is costly. This is ultimately played out in the cross, which we too are called to carry. This is beginning to look like authority as we have seen it before.

The risen Jesus is the embodiment of our reconciliation with God: peace be with you. The forgiveness that we offer is that of reconciliation, the good news is that through the risen Christ God and humanity are united in forgiving. Forgive as you have been forgiven is our mantra. Can we ever completely forgive, except for the most minor hurts? I don't think we can, I don't think I can. But we can offer God's forgiveness and *endeavour* to live in such a way that reflects this reconciliation. The Church is *constituted* by the forgiveness of sins, because forgiveness proclaims the resurrection, it is what makes us what we are; it is the rule that holds us together as a community.

As we offer God's peace this morning, let us be mindful of the authority bestowed on us. And as we reach out our hands to receive the sacrament may each of us know that God's forgiveness is indeed ours and that thankfulness is all that is asked of us. Amen.