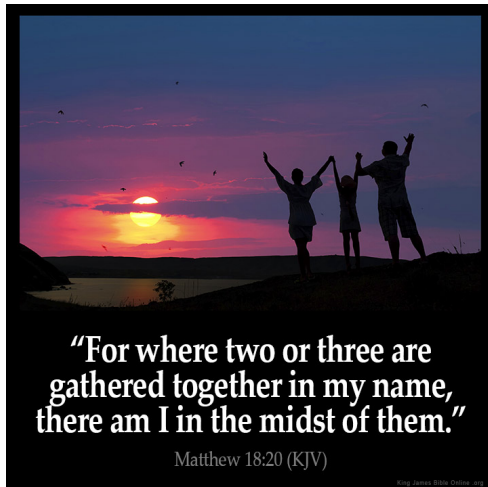


Trinity 14

Sunday 6th September 2020



Readings:

Exodus 12:1-14

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Matthew 18:15-20

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a

one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Reflection

This week's Gospel refers back a couple of weeks, repeating that pronouncement that "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It deals with the church's duty to look after the flock of Christ, and to reprove anyone at fault, not as punishment, but as a means of bringing them back into the fold and restoring them to their full status as a child of God. Where sin exists, the faithful Christian should be prepared to call it out and challenge the sinner. This is not to name and shame, as the current jargon has it, but to give the sinner a chance to repent and put away that sin. And not one, but several attempts must be made to do that. Only if every effort fails, is the sinner to be cut off from the church, or "excommunicated," which literally means denied the sacrament of communion and the fellowship which goes with it. And again, this is not punishment but to prevent the wider church from infection lest younger, inexperienced Christians see the sin as the norm and acceptable behaviour. This might all seem a bit authoritarian to us, but we need to remember the world the early Christians were living in. Although Jesus' ministry was originally a rural one, most first century Christians lived in large pagan cities where the acceptable behaviour was very different from that preached by Paul and the other missionaries and these words of Jesus would be very relevant. The authority Jesus is giving to the disciples enables them to take this disciplinary role and to lead and direct the people he is leaving in their care, so that they may be cleansed from sin, not polluted by it. It is linked with an Old Testament reading which records the institution of the first Passover, a defining display of God's grace and mercy. Our God is not about revenge or retribution but about loving forgiveness. God forgives us so much and yet still we persist in hugging our petty grievances and resentments to ourselves instead of making that push for reconciliation that we know is right.

Though this is the main thrust of the reading, the bit that everyone remembers is that last encouraging statement – "If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We usually take this to be about a prayer shared with others, but if we look at the context that was not Jesus' meaning. He is actually referring back to the joint action of church elders in dealing with recalcitrant sinners. It is further reassurance that they will have Jesus' backing. If they have a common purpose and ask his blessing on their efforts, he will be with them and their enterprise will flourish – the penitent will be brought back into communion. But this saying has been taken out of context and so misunderstood by generations of Christians.

And yet, I think that the misinterpretation is probably just as important and valuable to us as the true meaning. For it has encouraged us to come together in prayer and share our needs with each other, in the certainty that God was listening and would answer. That is not to say that solitary prayer is less valid. We can pray anywhere, anytime, by our beds, in the garden, in the car – preferably when stationary. God hears the prayer of every individual believer. We don't need a prayer partner or corporate prayer to know that we always have

his ear. But our experience of praying together in church and that of those who do have prayer groups, tells us that there is something comforting and reassuring about sharing those prayers, hearing other Christians give a resounding Amen. Knowing that other Christians agree with and share our thoughts does not make our prayer any more valid, but it affirms us in our own belief, and thereby increases our faith that our prayer will be heard and answered. As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, we need to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17) And if we can take two or three friends with us along the way, so much the better.

Amen

Prayers

Prayers for the people of Oldbury and Quatford

Lord, we miss each other.

It has been a long and hard separation
but we hope to be together again before too long.

Bless those who are lonely at this time
and grant them the comfort of knowing your presence.

We thank you that, even now, your church is growing.

And we welcome our new members baptised today,
Alfie Frizzell at Quatford and Maximus Gilbody at Oldbury.

Be with them and their families as they begin their new lives in Christ.

We pray for those members of our community who are ill at this time.

We pray for Jean Driver as she prepares for another stay in hospital,
and for Liz's sister Catherine recovering from a stroke.

We thank you for those of our number, who have had Coronavirus
and have recovered.

And pray that you will protect the rest of us from this awful disease.

We remember with love and sadness those who have recently died,
particularly at this time thinking of George Banks
and Peter Wilson's friend, David Round.

And also Bryan Morgan whom we lost a little while ago.

We thank you for their lives and their friendship.

And we ask your blessing on all their family and friends,
who love and miss them.

We pray, too, for your consolation
for all others who are in mourning or continue to mourn,
whether that loss be recent or of long standing.

Renew in us all, the joy and hope of the resurrection

Of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen

Today's Collect

Almighty God,
whose only Son has opened for us
a new and living way into your presence:
give us pure hearts and steadfast wills
to worship you in spirit and in truth;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

Blessing

May Christ who promised that
where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,
be with us now and always.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen