

MATTHEW 18:15-20  
BUILDING COMMUNITY

Community – this is something of a buzz-word today; it is used a lot but we're not always sure what it means. "Building Christ's Church in the Community" is our mission-statement and we think we know what we mean by that; the community is the place where we live, so we are trying to build Christ's Church in this place. But it means more than place: community is also used to mean people who share something in common, a faith, or people who have a common heritage or a common interest, or people who share things together such as property ownership. All of these are called community. Now we discover there is an on-line community, people who use social media to talk to each other, or to share ideas or even to worship together; this on-line community may never meet face-to-face, but it develops bonds of common interest and much more. Community!

The whole idea of community sounds good, with people living together in peace and harmony and caring for each other; it is an ideal way for people to be. But there are flies in the ointment: in Juniper Green in the 2011 census, 27% of people lived in single person households; that figure rose to 39% across Edinburgh, and it is 34% across Scotland. Have you noticed that other people can be strange; they have strange and annoying habits, and they make mistakes, and they are hard to get on with, they make life hard for us; the hardest thing we are ever called to do is get along with other people. There are people we think we know and want to call friends who ignore us in the street. We live in a culture that is very "me-centred" so that the way of the world is simply to look out for "No.1" and by that we mean "me" and sometimes to the extent of ignoring anyone else! Whilst building community sounds so good, it is fraught with difficulty!

Lest we think that the church is immune from that kind of criticism, the church can be just the same as any other community of people. The community of people that makes up the church can be warm, loving, and generous towards each other, supporting one another in all sorts of ways, praying for one another. But the same group of people can gossip, can be rude about people behind their back, can ignore people and treat them as if they don't exist. People can come and go without being noticed; others stand alone in the coffee room and no-one seems to notice that they are on their own. More and more people live on their own. For all these reasons, it is so important that church builds community; we need to be community builders – for ourselves, in the church; outside in the world – to work to build a sense of people together, caring for others especially the frail and fragile, because nobody else is doing it!

Jesus gives us an insight into the way in which community works. Today's passage seems to be part of a collection of words that are all about our attitudes to other people. Chapter 18 begins with thinking about greatness and Jesus describes greatness as being like a little child; the parable of the lost sheep describes God's attitude and begins with Jesus saying "See to it..." (*Matthew 18:10*) Then we find the words that we read about community and church and the way in which we get on with each other. There are some specific words to understand and there is the bigger picture of people living together in peace, a group of believers together in what we call "church", the people of God gathered together for worship and to follow Jesus. Here, we discover what is good about community; how to deal with community when it falls apart; and ultimately the church is a community with Jesus at the centre. Let's have a look!

The whole tenor of these verses is about people who care for each other; we will see how that works for people who make mistakes in a moment, but even something that seems negative, is a demonstration of care and concern for each other. The church cares for every part of its body, for people for whom things are going wonderfully well, for people who are struggling. "I tell..." (*Matthew 18:19*) There is something powerful about people praying together, agreeing on what they pray for; God sees that and answers our prayers. These twelve people had been thrown together by Jesus, the community of disciples, with a shared interest in following Jesus,

growing love for one another, but not all of the time. Later, they were to be church together and learn how to get on in love for one another without the physical presence of Jesus to keep them right! We see them fall out; we see some of them try to be more important than the others; they are not quite falling out over a bit of steak, (a reference to the Tom and Jerry cartoon we watched as part of the all-age talk!) but these can be of the same order!!

It can go wrong. *“If your...” (Matthew 18:15ff)* Here’s a bible passage that should be applied very carefully! It reads a bit like the inquisition, as if we are trying to find fault with someone and that will lead to them being thrown out of the church. In fact, the spirit of these words is very different; the spirit in these words is all about care and concern for someone who has lost their way. *“Do not...” (Matthew 18:10)* Jesus wants the community of the church to care for people who make mistakes or who take the wrong path, to care for them in such a way as we bring them back, restore them, bring to repentance if necessary, but to make every effort to help them stay within the church community. Someone who was going through a tough time in her life, and had earlier been going through a divorce, said to me later that at the time of her divorce she thought that “church was not for likes of me”. Why? Had someone told her that? Had someone given her that impression, or given her the cold shoulder because her life had gone pear-shaped?

There are two mistakes we can make: first of all, we can be so rigorous with people that it feels as if we have re-invented the inquisition, that we need to know everything in every salacious detail in order to throw them out and condemn them. Sorry, that is not concern for someone in a spirit of love; that is about knowledge, power and gossip. That kind of rigour is a big mistake; it is a destroyer of community and people will walk away from any church like that; there is no grace! Secondly, we can sweep things under the carpet and pretend that these wrong things don’t exist. We have pretended to be caring, but we have ignored wrongdoing; there has been no repentance, and we have ignored people who have been hurt and the church has been spoiled by a refusal to face up to things that have been wrong; it has all been swept under the carpet, except that it will still come out. Somewhere in between these two extremes is the church shaped by grace, ready to care for people for whom life is messy, ready to acknowledge mistakes and sin, and ready to bring people to repentance in spirit of love and reconciliation.

We are a community with Jesus at the centre. *“Again, I tell you...” (Matthew 18:19f)* This is what defines us as church. We can be a community of people with a common interest in religion, but church is much more than that; we are a people with Jesus at the centre. When we meet, Jesus is here: do we believe that? When two or three of us meet together to pray, Jesus is there with us, amongst us; do we see that? Of course, wherever we go, always, Jesus is with us, whether we are with other people or on our own. We are a community of people with Jesus at the centre, listening to us as we worship, prayer. We need to take that idea seriously: Jesus is with us, He provides for us, He listens to our prayers, He helps us, He builds His church. When we worship, when we pray, when we meet to plan the future shape of the congregation, Jesus is with us and we are a community with Jesus at the centre; the challenge for us is to see that!

Real people, real church! Here’s a couple of questions this raises for us: think about a conflict which has arisen within the Church at any time in its history; what might the outcome have been had the situation been handled according to the spirit of Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel reading? In a spirit of grace and community? Or identify a contentious issue, either within the Church, or between the Church and the world at large. Think about where you stand on that issue and why, and then try to imagine why someone might conscientiously hold the opposing position. How do you relate to that person? How can grace shape your relationship with them in a different way? Real people, real church – life is never going to be perfect peace, even in the church, but we are the community of faith who share a common bond; Jesus has done the same work in all of us.

Romans chapter 12, verses 9-21: Paul is community building in the church in Rome; there are lots of qualities there for us to consider; how do we build this kind of community?

How can I show love that is sincere?

What does it mean for me to be devoted to my fellow Christians in brotherly love?

How can I share with God's people who are in need?

What should I do to practice hospitality?

How do I rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn?

What must I do to live in harmony with you or live in peace with everyone?

How often have I taken revenge on someone who has wronged me?

There are lots of questions for us to ponder. There are more questions than answers. Who are the community builders? We all are! Or we all should be! We can be fostering good relationships with people who share our street, or who share our faith, or who share our family. The challenge for us to be people who care for each other. The Church is the community with Jesus at the centre, as we worship, pray, live together – we all have a part to play in making community stronger and deeper; we do this together!