

**10 September 2017**

**In it together**

**Matthew 18.15-20**

**Romans 13.8-14**

Five hundred years ago this year in 1517, an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther pinned a document known as the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church castle in Germany.

Martin Luther was unhappy about a number of practices that had been adopted by the Roman Catholic Church of his time, and challenged those practices on the basis of what he read of the Christian gospel in the New Testament.

The simple act of pinning a pamphlet to a door began the process of huge religious and political upheaval that spread across Europe and has forever left its mark on the Christian Church in the West.

Luther and his followers were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and a new alternative church was formed in Germany that believed it was being more true to the teaching of the New Testament.

The trouble is once one new expression of the church becomes legitimate, it opens the doors for others to say, 'We accept some of the things that you believe, but actually we think the New Testament says something different to the way you have organised things in your church.' And so either they are forced out, or they go off and organise their own church according to a new set of beliefs.

About a hundred years after Luther's act of defiance – at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – there were a number of Christian groups in this country who were unhappy with the way in which the church in this country was dominated by the State. Their reading of the New Testament made them ask some very serious questions about the way in which the church should be organised, about how decisions should be made within the church, and the very fundamental question about what makes a church a church.

And perhaps surprisingly to us, the verses that we have read from Matthew's gospel were key verses for them in deciding to make a break from the organised church of the time, and to face persecution in doing so.

Up until then it had been assumed by everyone that the church had to be a large institutional structure, and the institution of the church had to lay down its laws and structures for everyone to follow. So although the first protestant churches did not appoint a pope, they did have hierarchical structures which organised the life of the church. And in a way that was natural to them ... they simply couldn't visualise a church being organised in any other way.

And then a few small, independent-minded groups began to take seriously these verses from Matthew's gospel.

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I with them."

Now this would have been enormously encouraging to these small groups of Christians, who often had to gather together in secret, believing that whenever they gathered their Lord was with them.

But this also began to challenge the received wisdom about what was needed for a group of people to be a church. There is nothing here about needing the authority of a bishop, or the blessing of the state, or the presence of a priest – if Christ is present whenever two or three gather in his name, surely that is enough to make them a church?

Now, of course, this could potentially lead to a kind of anarchy where anyone could set up a new church if they weren't happy with what was going on in their present church ... but these early pioneers of what were to become Congregational churches and Baptist churches believed that they had to take the teaching of Jesus seriously.

They took the view – surely if Christ is present, then his church is present. So the basic model of the church is a gathering of Christians in the name of Christ to worship and to witness and to serve together.

But this passage also gave them a pattern of decision-making within the life of the church.

Firstly, they noted that when Jesus gives a step by step process for resolving differences in the church, if the first two steps don't bring about a reconciliation the dispute is to be brought to "the church".

This was a relational way of dealing with differences. If someone does something to harm you, you don't bury it and allow it to fester, but nor do you go public with it and gossip about it, or bad-mouth the person who has hurt you. You deal with it privately.

If that doesn't work, you bring two friends along to mediate.

Only if that doesn't work do you bring in the "church".

And they realised that Jesus wasn't talking about 'the institution of the church', nor was he using the word church as shorthand for 'church leaders' or 'church authorities'. They realised that Jesus was talking about a process in which you gathered together all of the local Christians, to get the wisdom of the community in resolving disputes.

And this thought then took them to v 18:

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Now there had been a lot of discussion about what this means and who this refers to over the previous hundred years, because the authority of the pope in the Roman Catholic Church had largely been founded on similar words of Jesus spoken only to Peter in Matthew chapter 16:

v18: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my church."

v19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The language of binding and loosing was language that was used by the rabbis of the time in their task of interpreting the meaning of law for everyday living – deciding what was permitted under God's law and what was forbidden.

And Jesus realises that there is going to be an ongoing task in the life of his followers of determining what it means to stay true to Jesus' words and ways in each new age.

But the question is who does he hand this task over to?

The Roman Catholic Church had homed in on Matthew 16 and decided that Peter's successors had a leading role to play in this task.

The first Protestant Churches had focused on Matthew 18 and decided that the same responsibility had been given to others within the church on an equal footing with Peter. But they had decided that the 'you' Jesus was speaking to must have been the group of twelve disciples.

So for churches after the New Testament period, it was the bishops working together who had an authoritative role in the life of the church.

But the early Baptists and Congregationalists read this passage differently.

Already Jesus has spoken about gathering the local Christians together to find their collective wisdom in resolving a dispute between two parties, so can it be possible that the 'you' of v 18 is addressing not only the disciples, but all of his followers.

Can it be possible that Jesus is saying that we all have a collective responsibility to discern what Christ is saying to his people, and to determine what it means to be true to Jesus in our particular age and time?

And this is indeed what the early Baptists and Congregationalists concluded – the two traditions that have come together to form Trinity Church. They concluded that each local church has the authority through the gathering of its members in prayer and fellowship to discern the mind of Christ for our life together.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century this was radical thinking indeed. This was well before any serious moves to expand democracy. And the churches were very clear that on the most significant matters of faith, both women and men were fully included in this process. [It has to be said that when churches began to own property, often women were excluded from taking part in decisions about property – but the really significant decisions about statements of faith, calling a minister women would be fully included.]

So these verses that we probably do not pay a great deal of attention to today were, at one time, quite explosive in their force. They helped to undermine an accepted way of viewing church, and to sow the seeds of traditions that we

have inherited today and are part of the heritage that have shaped our experience of church.

As we meet in Church Meeting after this service, we will be living out these words.

We will gather in the name of Christ, believing that Christ is present with us, as he is present with us in our worship.

We will be affirming that we are 'in it together' in this task of living out our Christian life in the world.

And Jesus has placed into all of our hands this task of 'binding and loosing' – of discerning the mind of Christ for our life together ... discovering that collective wisdom of what it means to be true to Jesus. But knowing that we need to do this together.

In the words of a wonderful hymn from an earlier Baptist Hymn Book – "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word."

And effectively these words give us permission to come to different conclusions than the conclusions reached by those who have gone before – but we need to come to those conclusions by listening to one another intently and carefully.

A lot of the time we will have fairly routine things to discuss and decide at Church Meetings, but every now and then there will be something that is highly significant that may threaten to divide opinion.

Although our way of doing business within our church looks like a kind of democracy, with everyone having a vote – the way we do things, when we do them at our best will be very different from the democratic processes that take place in other institutions.

Often democracy is thought of as the right to speak – and that indeed is an important principle at the heart of democracy.

But the right to speak is even more greatly enhanced when people attending a meeting recognise that they have a responsibility to listen. And above all at Church Meeting we have a responsibility to listen to God.

But what our traditions tell us is that we listen best to God when we listen most carefully to one another.