

6/9/20 Trinity 13 Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

I can't believe that we're into Autumn and looking back on the year, so far, that was, with lockdown, shielding, everywhere closed on a global scale with the pandemic which is still ongoing. It's good that the schools have gone back this week and it's been lovely to hear the children playing in the yard. And with young people going to university for the first time and those returning, I'm just praying that all the fears that the government are warning us are waiting to happen, don't happen and we're not hit with more local or national lockdown. With the threat of coronavirus hanging over us, especially as it was at the beginning of it all, I think it's brought home how finite life is, how fragile we are and that we never know the day or the time when something may happen to us or to someone we love. It has made many people fearful and taken away their confidence. But most of all is the time that's been lost to all of us.

Our readings today are about time and the importance of not wasting it and it focusses particularly on the relationships and attitudes towards others, especially as Christians. If everyone lived as Jesus taught us to then the world would be a better place with less selfishness and greed and the 'look after number one' attitude. Even simple respect for each other during this pandemic has been missing in those who won't wear masks or keep their distance from others. Things have changed in a good way but not in others.

Technology is making the world a more insular place where people communicate, work and spend leisure time in their own space, without having to mix with others. My granddaughter who is 10 this year, and many like her, are hooked on these ipod devices and I often wish she would spend more time with her nose stuck in a book.

Zoom meetings and the like have been great during the lockdown, but they're no substitute for actual face to face meetings. Basic human interaction is slowly being eroded and along with it our social skills so disputes and disharmony are more likely to happen when people are together.

As Christians, we are Christ's body, his church and Jesus tells us that there's no time for living with disharmony because things are challenging enough without conflicts and disagreements. If someone hurts us it's upsetting enough but as followers of Jesus, he teaches us that it is down to us to make things right as Paul said in Romans verse 10 "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

In Matthew, Jesus was speaking to his disciples about sorting out disagreements between themselves and where that fails, bring it to church. In this context, if a situation couldn't be resolved by the those involved then it went to the church to sort it out. These days if you've got something that you can't fix you're not going to bring it to church and get us all involved - but that was how it was dealt with then. Jesus talks about 'loosing' and 'binding' meaning whatever decision the church made it would be honoured in heaven if the conflict was dealt with prayerfully and so, guided by God, and confirms that his presence is in any situation, when it is approached prayerfully, "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."

Jesus appeals to us not to let hurts and disagreements get that bad that it needs mediation. It's hard to keep calm and think before a situation gets out of hand and we may turn our backs, walk away and refuse never to speak again leading to a cycle of bitterness or hatred.

Jesus calls us to speak to those who hurt us *then* to forgive them as he told Peter when he asked how often he should forgive, “As many as seven times?” “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times.”

I’ve probably mentioned this before but it’s such a good quote which sums up perfectly what bitterness and hatred does to us, “Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.” It leaves us twisted and hateful.

Many lost friendships and divided families happen because of initial reactions in disagreements - and of course - it happens within Christian friendships and families too. Reconciliation is wonderful but it very often comes years down the line when opportunities to get back together are wasted.

So, Jesus is telling us that the time is coming, we've got to move out of the darkness of bitterness and resentment and move into the light. His return is closer than we think and Paul likens the time that is now and appeals with urgency for us to “Wake from sleep for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers”.

Amongst other things, Paul urges us to avoid quarrelling, conflict and anger which leaves us open to bitterness which eats away at us does nothing to prepare us as disciples of Jesus who are awaiting his return. Jesus taught us how to live and to love one another, especially those who have wronged and hurt us and doing this shows that there is always hope for the future and that’s one thing we never give up on – is hope.

Amen