

Matthew 18:15-20 proper 18 year A St Stephen's Guernsey 2020

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The day after Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding in Westminster Abbey, a friend of mine was leading the afternoon service there.

He was greeted by a congregation of a thousand people- most unusual for so many to be there, even on a Saturday.

He began the service by saying

'It was so good of you all to come when you heard that I was preaching.' Their laughter, as he expected, put him in his place.

Later that summer, I visited a monastery in the heart of France where thousands of people go each week – Taizé.

It's a remarkably moving experience - partly to worship with the monks with their beautiful liturgy, wonderful music and lengthy periods of silence, but also to be in the company of so many people.

When Christians get disheartened about the decline in churchgoing it remains thought provoking to look at the number of people who go to church each Sunday with those who attend football matches each Saturday.

This is not a scientific comparison but is interesting nevertheless.

In 2019, the average weekend attendance in the Premier and Championship Leagues was 580 thousand.

I couldn't find a comparable figure for the other leagues which will be significant of course.

In 2019, the average number of people attending Church of England services on a Sunday was 722 thousand.

Even though going down, that's still a huge number of people.

But this raises a question: why do we seem to get so het up about numbers?

It's important, surely, to be very careful about the significance we attach to them?

And the Gospel reading reminds us of it- Jesus says to his friends that two or three people is enough

It's my guess that those who gathered in Westminster Abbey the day after the Royal wedding had not all gone there to pray – although they did experience prayer whilst they were there.

The thousands of people gathered in Taize are drawn for many a reason – often very personal. Not all of them religious.

Statistics have to be handled very carefully.

In my office I have some words of Einstein pinned up:

'Not everything that can be counted counts

And not everything that counts can be counted.' (repeat)

That kind of thinking echoes Jesus in this passage of Matthew's Gospel:

What matters is that two or three people gather-

To pray, to meet, to be part of a wider picture – and that that act is valued, by those who take part, but also by those who know themselves prayed for, and, from the words of the Gospel, in the heart of God too.

It is not dependent on their being thousands present.

The teaching of Jesus is backed up here by his examples of practical action:

If someone has a problem with another person within the church, first go and try to sort it out between you- don't involve other people if you can avoid it.

A lot of personal pain and argument could be avoided if we took that teaching to heart-

An awful lot can be sorted out and others simply don't need to know.

There's nothing like other people being pulled in unnecessarily and lots of people getting involved – each with their own opinion- to create strife – in families, in churches, in communities.

I love the words of George Harrison when he said

'Live in such a way that you would not be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip.'

We are intended to listen to one another to support each other and to learn from each other. It has always fascinated me that the letters that make up the word listen also make up the word silent.

There is such a lot to be said for both – in both our communications with God and with one another. Perhaps that is why God is present in the smallness of encounters with just a couple of people as well as in great gatherings-

In silence, is the potential to learn, to support, to listen in ways that can have real effect.

The great theologian Paul Tillich said that ‘the first duty of love is to listen.’

We need it in prayer, we need it in our relationships and we need it in our politics-

That is one of the reasons why, as Christians, we need to listen to those who are standing for office in the forthcoming election.

We need to listen so that we understand what the candidates stand for and hope to achieve – then we can talk, ask and comment

And we need to listen out of respect for their commitment and not encourage those who would speak harsh and sometimes cruel words without thinking.

It is part of Christian duty and responsibility to encourage thoughtful and positive participation in politics.

In the last British election a number of people were reported as saying they did not bother to vote because they felt it wouldn't make a difference and they were fed up of politicians. Christians need to be clear that everyone matters, that everyone's opinion matters and that we each have a contribution to make.

Just a couple of chapters back from this morning's Gospel reading, Saint Matthew makes his only other reference to the word Church in his Gospel.

There, Saint Peter is told that it is he who has the power to forgive sins or bind them in heaven for the whole church.

Here, it is brought to the level of individuals too – it is part of all our responsibilities. We are not to pass the buck. We are to engage in lives of forgiveness and reconciliation too. In fact, it is recommended that this is the place to start.

Numbers matter, of course they do.

But not because there is a need to get more people into church to demonstrate that it is a successful church – or a profitable church –

The number of people being drawn to faith matters if you believe that Christianity is true, full of integrity and love – and that that is shown forth in worship, in ethics and in the way we love- just as Saint Paul says in the epistle:

‘Owe no one anything , except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Being one or two can feel awesome and helpless – what can we do?

The Bible encourages us not to be defeated by that thought – but to take our active part.

Small, it reminds us is beautiful.

The God who cares about each hair on our heads, the lost sheep, the rejected cares for small expressions of faith and commitment.

The point is not the numbers who are there.

The point is that Christ is in the midst of them. They – and we – together and alone need to listen for him.

Amen.