



## EXPLORING THE THEME

### MATTHEW 18:15-20

#### Matthew's gospel

Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of the four. Jesus' life echoes the life of Moses – both are delivered from Egypt (Mt 2:13-23) and both teach Israel from a mountaintop (Mt 5:1). Matthew is deeply aware of Jewish custom and the ways in which the Law is fulfilled in the life of Jesus (5:17). He is also sharply critical of the teachers of Israel (Mt 23) yet is the only evangelist to use the word 'church' (Mt 16:18; 18:17). He writes between the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and splitting of the ways between the synagogue (where the first Christians found a home) and the new 'church'.

#### The 'church' in Matthew 18

We can see the life of the church reflected in Matthew as in a mirror, especially in Chapter 18, which is devoted to teaching about the church. It has been called 'the Book of the Church'. It begins by asking the question, 'What is 'greatness' in the kingdom of heaven?' (18:1), possibly because there had been struggles for power. It then passes by way of the wellbeing of '...these little ones who believe in me' (18:6) and we are reminded of the importance of the spiritual health of each individual, for if one sheep goes astray, the shepherd devotes himself to its reclamation, so that not one should be lost. That suggests that 'stumbling blocks' had been created which harmed members of the community (18:7,8), and that they needed bringing back. It ends with the absurd gospel mathematics of forgiveness (70 times 7) and the exemplary parable of the unforgiving servant, which shows how God will treat his servants if they ignore his mathematics of mercy (18:35).

#### Holding each other to account

The model of discipline and good order for dealing with sin which Matthew's Jesus suggests for the church (18:15-20) is very Jewish. A Rabbi who was executed in 135 said 'When two sit and there are between them the words of the Torah, the divine presence rests upon them.' For Matthew, Jesus fulfils the Law and he promises to be present '...where two or three are gathered in my name.' Indeed, it is that very presence which is the both the essence of the church and its very reason for being. This is a very 'high' understanding of the church.

The three-fold pattern of individual conversation, taking along witnesses, and consulting the whole community is similar to processes within the contemporary Jewish ascetic Qum'ran community, and the Pauline letters (eg. 1 Cor 5:4-5). However, what we see in Matthew is a remarkable picture of the lengths to which Christians must go to produce a healthy community. Behaviour and beliefs are important. There must be strong boundaries in the church – for example abuse of any kind cannot be tolerated – and yet the dynamic of church life has to be a continual recourse to forgiveness because Christians know themselves as the forgiven community.

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One who persists in sin is to be excluded, treated as a 'Gentile and a tax-gatherer' (18:17) – but the community are never to forget that Jesus' mission was to save Gentiles and tax-gatherers, and so the process of proclamation and care becomes iterative.

### The importance of good processes

The ways in which the church organises itself and ensures the wellbeing of all is of critical importance today so that all within its life are safe, secure and spiritually healthy. History shows us how much the church cared about those issues. Boundaries were important to the medieval church – with the ultimate sanction of excommunication. At the reformation there were fierce debates over whether the state or the church had the right to impose excommunication. Now those debates are transposed into discussions about how churches can encourage true discipleship and authentic, dedicated Christian living. That is as true of ancient monastic orders as it is of the newest house churches and the historic churches. What can we learn from Matthew, and from each other's practice, about being a healthy church, for the sake of Jesus Christ?

