

Vespers Homily

The Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 23, 2015

Psalm 149
Matthew 18: 15-20

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is an Anglican Church in London, rather close to the British Museum, named All Saints, on Margaret Street.

It was constructed in the 1850's in what is called the "High Victorian Gothic style"; it is spectacular. The architect was William Butterfield, a major force in reviving the gothic; All Saints is his masterpiece. Rather than using stone, Butterfield used alternating courses of colored brick. He filled the interior with brightly colored murals and gold, all illuminated by stained glass. It is transcendent.

All Saints was, and still is, the mother church of the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Anglican Church. The movement remains an alternative to the sterile, highly verbal liturgy of what came to be called Low Church or Broad Church, with the Anglo Catholic church providing a complete experience of worship involving all the senses – sight, hearing, touch, and smell.

The liturgy is in the Anglican tradition with organ music, vested choir, vestments, and incense, all within the framework of the *Book of Common Prayer*, not a Roman Catholic Missal.

From 1908 to 1934, All Saints' rector was Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay. His parishioners affectionately addressed him as Father Henry Falconer Barclay Mackay. Mackay was the personification of the Anglo-Catholic ideal, tall and ascetic, always seen in cassock and berretta, with a superb liturgical style and a memorable voice with which he preached spiritual, scriptural sermons, sermons that remain profoundly moving to this day.

If Mackay had a fault, as some priests do, it was in his inability to relate to the everyday affairs of some of the parishioners of All Saints. Not that he was unsympathetic or not pastoral; his experience simply did not include such things. His biographer said, "I am not aware that Mackay bore fools gladly; I am not aware that he bore fools at all."

If you had just celebrated a beautiful liturgy and given your best and most elevating sermon and were standing in the narthex greeting parishioners and were admonished for the lack of blue crayons in the Sunday school, you, too, might be rather sympathetic with that. But I digress.

I've been working on that for years, and I believe I am getting better. At least, I hope it's not quite so obvious. Happy need not restrain me nearly as often. My memory goes back some years to the Baccalaureate service for our older son, Bill, at Evans High School near Augusta. We were seated in the school gymnasium, crowded on bleacher seats on a warm, Georgia afternoon. The keynote speaker was the Chairman of the Columbia County Board of Education, John Pierce Blanchard.

To give him credit, Mr. Blanchard had guided the county education system through the turmoil of desegregation in the sixties, at peril to his life. However, he remained a profoundly conservative man, a pillar of the Baptist Church, and a Biblical literalist. He began his address with the words, and I quote, "In the year 500 BC, when Moses wrote the Bible." Happy restrained me.

I do not understand biblical literalism. Put another way, I don't understand a willingness to simply accept someone's idea or opinion about the scripture without looking at sources and translation – discovering what words mean, why words were written, by whom and for whom. It's all there in the text waiting to open our minds to layer upon layer of meaning. All it asks is a bit of scholarship, a bit of independent thought. Which brings me to Matthew 18:15-20. It's about time, you may say.

We don't know who wrote the Gospel attributed to Matthew. A school of thought linking it to the disciple Matthew, the tax collector, has no real basis and is quite improbable. Some say that it was written in Edessa in Syria based on the presence of a sizable Jewish Christian community there. That is possible. We really don't know when it was written, only that it appears to have been written after Mark's gospel. The entire New Testament appears to have been written after Mark's gospel.

“Why” and “for whom” are answered in the text itself.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to understanding scripture is the idea that we have received it exactly as it was first written. Actually, the scriptures, particularly the Synoptic Gospels, were edited, added to, subtracted from and rearranged for centuries as the Christian movement, the Church, grew and confronted new concerns and new needs – concerns and needs that demanded new ideas and postures. What better way to justify new ideas than to claim them to be ancient, claim them to be based on the very words of Jesus? Some of Jesus' words are actually thought to come from the “Q” for *quelle*, the German word for “source,” a document lost long ago, if it ever existed. Other words were additions, mistranslations, and scribal glosses to the texts. Others were obviously added to convey a message. This passage of Matthew is message-conveying.

Matthew's Gospel is generally acknowledged to have been written for the Jewish, Hebrew-speaking community of Christians in

Palestine. This has been based on the writer's assuming that the reader is familiar with Jewish custom and tradition, just as Luke and John feel the need to explain such things. Accordingly, Matthew was the foundational Gospel of the very first, the original Palestinian Christians who were closest to Jesus and to the sites of His ministry.

Curiously, those Christian communities did not grow while Christianity was growing and thriving elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, in Greece and Italy and France. In a guidebook to the Holy Land composed in the early fourth century, only three Christian villages could be identified. One hundred years later, there were many such villages, and by the sixth century, Christians were actually in a majority, the result of permanent settlement by pilgrims and the conversion of pagans. The Jewish Christians were a minority, submerged in their own land. Matthew 18:15-20 is a reaction to their loss of contact with their cultural roots as Christianity became more western-centered and "Gentilized."

The Hebrew scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament, are called the Tanakh, part of which are the five Books of Moses, called Torah, the Law and the Prophets. In addition, there is a body of writing called the Talmud, sometimes called the Oral Torah. It consists of the teachings of many Rabbis, 6200 pages of teaching. The Talmud is a compilation of two traditions. The Mishnah is a Palestinian legal code, a collection of Rabbinic traditions redacted by Rabbi Judah Hanisi in the third century CE. The other body of writing is the Gemara, written in Babylon in the fifth century, a summary of Rabbinic debate over the Mishnah ("Rabbi Hillel says, but Rabbi Issac says"). It is probable that the material in the Talmud had been in an oral tradition for many years before it was codified and written.

All of which is significant because this reading from Matthew is a restatement of the Talmud. The question of dealing with a church member who sins (in the early codexes it is "sins against God") is from the Mishnah, Sotah 1-2; the assurance about two or three being gathered together is from the Mishnah, Avot 3:2. How and why did

material from Jewish writings from the 3rd and 5th centuries find their way into the Gospel of Matthew?

The “how” is quite simple. A scribe put them there.

The “why” is just as simple. The Jewish Christian community in Palestine was in grave danger of disappearing. Centuries of tradition preserving the actual roots of Christianity and its earliest associations with the ancient traditions of Israel were in danger of being lost.

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” is actually a statement that the Jewish Christian community continued to be empowered to speak and act in God’s name.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them” is a powerful assurance that no matter how marginalized the community may become, however submerged in a sea of newcomers to the faith and to Palestine, in times of change and division and turmoil, they are always in the eye and the mind of God; and He will be present with them.

A splendid reassurance, then and now.

In His Holy Name.