

## The One binding two and threes

**Twenty-third Sunday of the Year** – Cycle A – September 6, 2020

**Readings:** Ezek 33:7-9; Rom 13:8-10; Mt 18:15-20

*“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”* (Mt 18:20)

Prologue: Taking cue from the number ‘two’ which appears five times in the gospel and the number ‘three’ which appears twice, one can develop the theme of (a) human *oneness* brought about through reconciliation, or, (b) Divine *Oneness* at the heart of all our efforts to love and forgive each other.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Ezekiel—one of the four major prophets of the First Testament—prophesied from 593–571 BC to fellow-exiles in Babylon. This was the time when the tribe of Judah brought death and destruction upon itself by abandoning its One God, Yahweh,<sup>1</sup> which also resulted in the razing of the treasured Temple of Jerusalem desecrated by unworthy priests. Idolatry, insolence and infidelity summed up the disposition of those who refused to heed the warnings of the prophets, mainly Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The Babylonian Exile occurred in 587. Ezekiel would continue prophesying to his people, entreating them to repent and be reconciled to the One God who would replace their stony hearts with “a new spirit ... and hearts of flesh” (11:19; 36:26). In today’s passage, not only are the people responsible for repentance and reconciliation, but the prophets and priests, too, should bear responsibility to proclaim God’s word and lead people back to God. Hence, Ezekiel is reminded of his role of being a *sentinel*, i.e., a watchman atop a hill who warns villagers of approaching enemies or invaders (see also 3:16). The prophet’s job is to call a spade a spade—telling sinners to mend their ways. If they do, they will be saved; but if they do not, they will have to pay the price of their iniquity but the prophet will be spared. The reading puts great responsibility on those who are in positions of governance: priests, pastors and parents who must serve as prophets to call out right from wrong, good from evil, dharma from adharma.
2. The gospel of Matthew is written with the Jewish community in mind, keen on accepting the new ‘Way’ or ‘Marga’ of Christ, but unsure of how their former cherished religious places and practices be reformed. In the gospel passage of two Sundays ago (Mt 16:13-20), Jesus speaks of ‘church’ (v.18) for the first time, names Peter as its rock-cornerstone, and entrusts him with “*binding and loosing*” (v.19). In today’s passage (Mt 18:15-20), Jesus again mentions ‘church’ twice (in v.17) and repeats the “*binding and loosing*” mission—but now, not just for Peter but for all his disciples. In Jesus’ time, it was the prerogative of Jewish rabbis to inflict penalties and penances (*binding*) on errant members guilty of sin; and, after such ‘sinners’ had performed the penance, they were relieved of their burden (*loosing*). This process—which we now term *reconciliation*—is thus not only the ministry of bishops and priests, but of all Christians. Evangelist Matthew systematically explains how harmony must be restored in the church. Clearly, he has two passages at the back of his mind from the First Testament, namely, Lev 19:17-18 and Deut 19:15—the former

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘*Shema Israel*’—or, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut 6:4)—is the most central Jewish prayer, assertive of strict Jewish monotheism. This line is reiterated by Jesus when asked: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mk 12:29). Indeed, the Oneness of God can never be compromised.

referring to “love of neighbour” and the latter to the need for “*two or three* witnesses to convict anyone of a crime.” The process of reconciliation entails three stages: private, public and official. At the private level, there’s the possibility of one-to-one fraternal correction between two persons. When things go public, two or three witnesses can be roped in as mediators to broker peace (as in Deut 19:15). However, if the problem still remains unresolved at the first two levels, then erring parties could approach official bodies like the church. The words, “If he (sinner) refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector,” do not seem to be the words of Jesus. Bible commentators believe that the words are a later addition since they do not reflect the attitude of Jesus to sinners (see, for e.g., Mt 9:10-13).

3. Apart from familiarizing themselves with the processes of reconciliation which Jesus was suggesting, Jewish converts to Christ’s Way also had to make meaning of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. This created a crisis, for it symbolized the ‘*Centre*’ wherein God dwelt and reigned, with strict observance of the Law as the measure of one’s righteousness and godliness. The Jewish Rabbi Hananiah—who died in the year 135 AD—clearly stated: “Wherever *two* meet to study the words of the Law, the presence of God (the *Shekinah*) is with them.” Now, instead of teaching that God is present where two believers gather for the sake of the Law, Jesus replaces the Law with his presence, linked to his supreme ‘Law of Love’. Indeed, the One God is palpably present when the twos and threes who re-present God love one another just as Jesus did. The coming together of twos and threes in Christ’s name for prayer or worship is always effective because His Abba-Father always listens to his prayer (see Jn 11:42).

### **Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Oneness and Reconciliation**

While Matthew describes the process of reconciliation, in today’s second reading Paul enumerates the qualities required for harmonious living. The passage provides the second part of the Decalogue—the Ten Commandments, dealing with one’s relationship with others—with the climax from Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbour as yourself!” Paul writes “*owe no one* anything except to love one another” as if there’s some ‘debt of mutual love’ to be paid back. Indeed, isn’t each one of us deeply indebted to our families, friends and communities? Isn’t it their love that has moulded us into ‘who’ and ‘what’ we are today? Paul concludes: “Love is the fulfillment of the law,” and adds elsewhere, “The greatest is love” (1 Cor 13:13). How true!

**In Lighter Vein:** A couple was constantly quarrelling for the flimsiest of reasons. Once, after a heated argument with his wife, the man shouted, “Why can’t we live peacefully like our two dogs who never fight?” “No, they don’t,” agreed his wife; and added, “but bind them together as we’re bound in marriage, and see what happens!” When two or three persons are bound—as in matrimony or in family—conflicts inevitably arise. Today’s readings guide us in reconciling dissenting ‘twos’ in marriage or divisive ‘threes’ in family not only with private persuasion and public psychosocial skills, but with the help of the One Spirit of the Triune God.

**Reflection:** Ever since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, haven’t we been meeting in twos and threes in Christ’s name without a church-building? Hasn’t The One been listening to our prayers?

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