

## Homily: 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

It has been lovely to see the children back at school this week, after such a long time away. I've asked a few of them if it's good to be back – most of them seem very happy! When I ask them why, they don't say the things that we might think: "It's good because it gets our education back on track" or "It's nice to finally have some routine and normality back in my life." Invariably they say, quite simply, "I'm happy to see my friends again."

Friendship, relationships, love – these are a great gift from the Lord. We need one another – I feel very strongly that the experience of the last few months has taught me in a new way just how much I need my family, my friends, the members of our parish community. Each one of us is a gift to the other, and each person the Lord puts before us is a gift to us, even if there are times when that's not obvious. As Catholics, we know very deeply and instinctively that we belong to a family of faith, a communion centred on Christ, which encompasses our brothers and sisters not just in our parish but throughout the world and across the ages. We are in communion with the Lord, with the saints and with one another; this is a truth which is beautifully expressed and made present at every Mass.

St Matthew's Gospel highlights the importance of belonging to the Church, and today Matthew records for us some sayings of Jesus in which He speaks about our need of others. He points us to three ways in which we benefit from one another: fraternal correction, communal prayer and the presence of Christ where we gather in His name.

Both the first reading and the Gospel today remind us of our duty to gently guide and correct one another, always in a spirit of love, in such a way as we grow in holiness. This must never be about getting others to do what I want, but always about helping them grow closer to the Lord. And we must be ready to receive this gentle correction from those around us. It's not always easy – I can think of times in my life when others have corrected me and I have felt hurt or angry at their words, only to discover, on reflection, that they were right. And so they helped me to grow in holiness. The Lord tells us today that this correction should be done as gently as possible – quietly and privately at first, and only later to involve others, if necessary. And He also makes the purpose of it abundantly clear: "If he listens, you have won back your brother", He says. Any words of challenge we speak must always be to try to win them back, to restore relationships, bonds of love, between one another and with the Lord. If we're tempted to speak for any other reason: frustration, anger or fear, for example, it's best to keep silent.

The second benefit we receive from others is prayer. "If two of you agree to ask anything at all in my name, my Father will grant it." There is more benefit in praying in union than praying alone: it becomes a joint venture of love. When we have private prayer in the church I often feel encouraged by knowing that others are praying around me, even though we're all in silence. When Pope Benedict came to the UK in 2010 there was a prayer vigil in Hyde Park, during which, at one point, 80,000 people were praying silently together in front of the Blessed Sacrament. I wasn't there, but even to watch it on television was a powerful experience. St John Vianney uses the image of fire: if you set fire to a piece of straw, he

says, it will burn with a flame. But set fire to bails of hay and you really have a powerful force. When we pray in union with one another there is great power, great blessing, for us and for our world.

Finally, the Lord gives us a wonderful promise: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there.” There is a special presence of Christ wherever people are drawn into communion with one another through Him. This should not surprise us: where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, they can only be drawn together by love. And where love is present, God is present, because God is love. Christ is love.

In the book of Genesis, God looks upon the man he created and says, “It is not good that the man be alone.” This is a fundamental truth of human nature. We are made for relationship, for friendship, for love, for communion. The Lord today spells out for us why we need one another, and at its heart the reason, simply, is love. This is the fulfilling of the whole Law, as St Paul tells us today. It is love which calls us to conversion, love which calls us to raise our hearts and minds to God in prayer, love which draws us more deeply into the mystery of Christ, when we gather together in His name.

Fr Andrew

