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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : 13th Sunday after Trinity ~ September 10, 2017

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During the summer, I visited a clergy friend who was organising a summer activity day for children. She had to get them to line up in order, first of all according to age and then secondly in height order. It was fascinating to watch the children do this. Quite naturally they helped each other with the task and showed one another if they were in the wrong place. Because they were working as a team, even though they didn't realise it, no one got upset when they were in the wrong place – they just moved into the right place.

Today's Gospel reading gives us some teaching about helping one another to keep in order as we live as Christians. The ideal group of Christians is where all are, as the saying goes, singing from the same hymn sheet. Whenever I go to a concert at the Royal Albert Hall, I love to sit behind the orchestra and watch the players. Everyone has their part to play, down to the smallest triangle. Of course the conductor leads them but they clearly have to listen to each other so that they play together. A congregation, I would suggest, is no different. Yes, everyone will have different talents, gifts and skills, but if they are able to listen to each other and work together then they become a broadly united group.

In our first reading, Paul goes back to basics as he reminds his readers of the 10 commandments and gives some straight advice about our behaviour. Then in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching about the kingdom and, as I say, is giving some very down-to-earth, practical advice to his hearers. In the earlier verses, Jesus has been teaching about the way a shepherd naturally searches for a lost sheep until he finds it. He then moves onto a very specific plan of action where there is, shall we say, a falling out between two people – and what you should do. This is always a very popular question at interviews – 'how would you deal with conflict, vicar'? If ever I am asked that question, I usually answer that it is always best to attempt reconciliation, to get people talking together, maybe with a third party as a bridge between the two. It is of course communication which is the key. Talking through an issue can often resolve the problem, though of course not always. Would that some of our politicians could do the same! But the key is communication. I was chatting to a couple celebrating their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They told me that the key is to talk everything through together – with neither dominating the relationship. Of course that is an ideal – but all too often it isn't that simple and a relationship can so easily break down. We all know that. But it should stop us trying.

In today's world, of course, we have endless ways of communicating – but so many of them are at third hand. Emails, texts, social media, even letters and cards, all encourage communication – but indirectly. They are, I'm afraid, no substitute for talking together. That's why the Gospel accounts are so fascinating – because they record Jesus speaking directly to the people, to the disciples, to the one man, one woman. I was fascinated to read a plea from a Vicar to his parishioners asking them to speak to him rather than email – easier said than done in this age, I suspect!

But my point is this. One of the most helpful features for us as Christian today as we gain insight into the ministry of Jesus and his teaching and healing is his clear concern for the one, for the individual. Yes, of course he spends time speaking to the large crowds gathered to hear him and be taught by him. But I also want to suggest that it is his ministry to the one that should give us the most encouragement as we go about our varied ministries, as we go about our task as Christians in caring for those and ministering to those with whom we have contact, however it is that we choose to communicate with them.

I want to finish with reading a paragraph from a small book, published 45 years ago, which has been of enormous help to me – and no more so than this particular paragraph. The book is called 'The Christian Priest Today' and was written by Michael Ramsay, a saintly and prophetic Archbishop of Canterbury from 1961 to 1974. It is written for the priest – but I would want to remind you that we all share in ministry as Christians together – and that its words are as relevant to you as they may be to me. This is what Michael Ramsay wrote:

*The glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God. Let that be your inspiration. Consider our Lord himself. Amidst a vast world with its vast empires and vast events and tragedies, our Lord devoted himself to a small country, to small things and to individual men and women, often given hours of time to the very few or to the one man or woman. In a country where there were movements and causes which excited the allegiances of many – the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes and others – our Lord gives many hours to the one woman of Samaria, one Nicodemus, one Martha, one Mary, one Lazarus, one Simon Peter – for the infinite worth of the one is the key to the Christian understanding of the many. You may be able to help influence the world's problems. But you will never be nearer to Christ than in caring for the one man, the one woman, the one child.*

If we can all be involved in this sort of quiet and faithful ministry together here at Christ Church, then we will, without knowing it, be working together, as the children were at that summer activity day, helping to create the kingdom of God. 'For where two or three meet together in my name, I am there among them'. Amen.