

The following is the text of Father Fraser's homily on Sunday, September 4, 2005.

"...where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
(St Matthew 18.20)

As you may remember, two weeks ago our Gospel Reading included the well-known and controversial passage from St Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus said to Simon, "...I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

I pointed out that this is the "proof text" used by the First Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in 1870 for its dogmatic declaration that the Bishop of Rome, as the successor of St Peter, is the dominically-instituted, absolute, Universal Primate of the Church who is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals. Therefore, to be a part of the True Church, one – by Christ's command - must be under the Bishop of Rome's jurisdiction.

I went on to say that Jesus did indeed give this authority to Peter, but we find two chapters further on in St Matthew's Gospel that Jesus also gave this same authority to *all* the Apostles as a group. Therefore the Early Christian Church taught - and Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism continue to teach - that it is the Apostles (and their successors today, Bishops validly consecrated in the Apostolic Succession) *as a body* who have the authority to "bind and loose," i.e. to interpret Christ's revelation and apply it to new situations.

We have just heard this passage from the 18th Chapter of St Matthew's Gospel. It always captures our attention because of the controversy which has surrounded the question of who holds the *Magisterium* in the Church, i.e. the authority to

determine what is authentic Christianity and what is not. (Classical Protestantism says that it is each individual Christian reading the Bible for him/herself; traditional Roman Catholicism says that it is the Bishop of Rome alone; Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy say that it is the Bishops of the Catholic Church gathered together as a body in a General Council.)

As significant as this is, however, there is something else in today's Gospel Reading which is extremely important and can very easily be overlooked. Jesus went on to say to His disciples, "...where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

New Testament scholars point out that what Jesus is using here is the contemporary rabbinical teaching that when two pious Jews sat together to discuss the words of the Torah (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament), the divine presence was with them. Although the significance of this one sentence probably completely escapes us, the disciples knew exactly what Jesus was referring to. Jesus is once again taking contemporary Jewish belief and practice, "giving it a twist," and making it into an element of the New Covenant.

When they taught that when pious Jews gathered around the Torah the divine presence was with them, the rabbis were saying that religious faith centered in Scripture. Jesus said, "...where two or three are gathered *in my name*, there am I in the midst of them." The Church of the New Covenant gathers together not around Scripture as in the Old Covenant but around the Person of Jesus Christ.

While Holy Scripture is very important as a divinely inspired witness to the Revelation, it is an historic fact that Jesus never wrote a word of Scripture. Jesus did not create (nor command nor talk about) a Bible but established a Church: the holy Catholic Church, which He empowered to continue the Incarnation. That is, the Church continues to make Christ and His ministry physically present in the world until He comes again at the end of time. And Jesus talked a great deal about His Church!

Christians gather – not around Scripture as in the Old Covenant – but around the Person of Jesus Christ, and it is the seven Sacraments administered by the Catholic Church which make Jesus Christ physically present today.

The Catholic Church, which Christ established and empowered, wrote the Scripture of the New Testament. The Bible did not create the Church; the Church created the Bible; and only the Bishops of the Catholic Church – by Christ’s command – can authoritatively interpret the Bible. The Church came first, and it continues to be first. That is why the question of validity and authenticity in the Church is so important: the validity of the teaching authority, the validity of an ecclesial body as an authentic part of the one Catholic Church, the validity of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, and the validity of the other Sacraments.

Protestants, like those of us in the Catholic tradition, get frustrated with the problems in the Church. But in the wake of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500’s, they threw out the Church as a divine institution and all its divine, sacramental elements. As understandable as this impulse may seem from time to time, there is simply no getting around the fact that what Jesus Christ established and commanded we continue was a divine, sacramental institution which He empowered to be His incarnate body here on earth until He returns again at the end of time. We cannot throw it out any more than we can throw out the Sacred Scripture it created or any of Jesus’ other teachings.

What we can do is keep ever before us the promise which Jesus made and which St Matthew has recorded in today’s Gospel Reading: “...where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Jesus is ever with us; Jesus is Lord; and Jesus is coming again to bring in the Kingdom of God on earth. When we stay centered in Jesus Christ, though we may get frustrated from time to time, we have nothing to fear. And Jesus Christ’s presence is what He promises us today and makes actually present in the Eucharist you and I are about to receive.