



Artwork by Moya Hogarth

***Where two or three meet in my name* (1000, 2000)**

Ezk 33:7-9; Ps 94: 1-2, 6-9 R v\*; Rm 13: 8-10; Al Jn 17: 17; Mt 18:15-20

A stock comic portrayal of Christian communities, such as monasteries or parishes, is of bickering, backbiting and bearing grudges. In any community there is almost bound sometimes to be some friction among its members – genuine disagreement but also hurt resulting from tactlessness or impatience, and sometimes worse.

Today's gospel reading gives guidance to the earliest Church on how we as Christians, as sisters and brothers in Christ, should resolve any serious difficulties which arise between us. It outlines a three-stage system of dispute resolution. First, if one of the community does something wrong, point it out to them, discreetly, the two of you alone<sup>1</sup> – an honest confrontation. This helps to eliminate misunderstanding, to prevent the offender being embarrassed in public and to avoid an offended party bottling up resentment.<sup>2</sup> Note that the "wrong" may not necessarily be one committed against the person taking it up: it may be against someone else or against the community ("*ekklesia*", "church") as a whole.

If he or she listens – success! If not, then take two or three witnesses along.<sup>3</sup> This requirement for witnesses seems to presuppose some kind of criminal offence<sup>4</sup> but the requirement that the offender listen to them suggests some kind of mediation procedure. If that is unsuccessful then the whole community, the church, is to consider it:<sup>5</sup> if the offender is obdurate and the community so judge, he or she is to be excluded from the life of the community – excommunication.<sup>6</sup> But this is to be taken very seriously by the community: where in such a case two or three gather together in Jesus's name he will be there with them.<sup>7</sup>

We can learn from this procedure for serious disputes and adapt it to our own rather different historical circumstances, but without establishing what could be kangaroo courts if we are not careful. We need to examine our own consciences before pointing out others' faults to them. As St Paul points out in today's reading from his letter to the Romans, the overriding commandment, which sums up all others, is to love one another. This entails forgiveness seventy times seven, as we shall hear in next Sunday's gospel.

<sup>1</sup>Mt 18:15

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lv 19: 17. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him". SP v 1, p269, n 15

<sup>3</sup> Mt 18:16

<sup>4</sup>Cf Dt 19:15. "only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall the charge be sustained"

<sup>5</sup> Mt 18: 17

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 18

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 19-20