

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR 23rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

On a trip to the Holy Land, we descended to the Dead Sea on an extremely hot day and with some trepidation took a plunge or rather a float in the Dead Sea, after crossing a lot of mud to get there. As we were going back to our hotel in Bethlehem we could look up to the hills and see the caves where the Dead Sea scrolls had been hidden and been to be refound in 1946 by a Bedouin shepherd. Since then they have been examined over and over again, and most people think they were of the Essene Group there. Some new writings and many copies of the Hebrew scriptures. The Essenes from about 300 BC probably continued into the time of Jesus. Some people believe that some of the pieces are Christian.

What was essential to the Essenes was that they rejected the Temple as the centre of worship, which they felt had become corrupt (as Jesus did), and for them the community was where God truly resided among his people. We can immediately see some similarities to what Jesus preached.

The Essenes learnt from their experience of living as a community and one of their teachings was as follows:

"They shall rebuke one another in truth, humility and charity. Let no-one address a companion with anger or ill-temper. Let him not hate him but let him rebuke him the very same day lest he incur the guilt of him."

We can again see something in this of Jesus' approach to building his own community, the Church.

When Matthew writes his gospel his Christian community has already been in existence for about 30 years, so they have learnt some of the problems of living together. And when he writes Matthew is answering many of the community's questions. How did Jesus expect us to live as he wished? We have seen some of the problems and battles within us already?

Matthew puts together various quotes of Jesus and creates this chapter (18) on how to be a Christian community.

The aim comes in the last wonderful verses. If you as my community 'bind anything on earth it will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose will be loosed in heaven.' And finally: 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you.' What power of forgiveness which was given to Peter and the disciples is opened up to the community as the body of Christ.

The Catechism says to us: 'It is not in our power not to feel, or to forget, an offence; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession.'

The Essenes were much about purification and their practice of washing in special pools was very much about this as our baptism service was to be later and now.

At baptism we ask the Holy Spirit to come down on the baptised as the Spirit did upon Jesus at his baptism.

So Jesus set out on his mission with that start. So do we in readiness to be a part, a building stone, of our new community. Forgiveness, whether received or given, Jesus teaches us, is also to be a vital part of our mission and community.

The Essenes knew, the early Christians were taught and knew, that a community cannot exist without forgiveness.

At Easter each year we repeat the the creed of our belief and the priest sprinkles us with holy water reminding us of our baptism. Possibly we do not think of it at the time, but it should also remind us to offer our hearts to the Holy Spirit so that we can live together in Christ's peace.