



REFLECTION BY REVEREND TONY MEEK

A few years ago, I played the part of Major General Stanley in an Ipplepen and Denbury parish concert production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. Near the end of that delightful light opera, when the pirates have completely overwhelmed the woefully inadequate little posse of policemen – Devon and Cornwall Police must have been facing ridiculous budget cuts even then – the Sergeant of Police reverses the situation in an instant by calling upon the pirates to give themselves up to the police in Queen Victoria's name – which of course they do immediately.

This is a model that comes to my mind when our Gospel references doing something in Jesus' name, as happens in today's reading from Matthew. I think of the absent monarch delegating to an underling some portion of her authority so that some minor affair of state runs smoothly. In this model, the name of the monarch functions as a badge or a seal, some sort of official statement that the underling is speaking for the monarch because the monarch is elsewhere.

When we begin to preach, we often use words which place what we are about to say "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit". How is our invocation of God's name any different from the Police Sergeant invoking Queen Victoria's? Could we possibly be implying that God is an absent sovereign, and we are speaking on God's authority because God couldn't quite get here this morning? I certainly hope not. And here is where we, disciples of Jesus Christ, diverge from the underlings of Queen Victoria. Notice what Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel reading: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them."

Whenever we invoke the name of Jesus, we do not do so in order to stand in for an absent saviour; rather, we invoke Jesus' name to awaken ourselves to the ultimate reality of Christ's very presence in our midst. Jesus expresses this ultimate reality when he says, "I am there among them". In Greek, this phrase literally means, "I am there *in the middle* of them." In other words, the presence of Christ forms the invisible connective tissue in our relationships. We make this connection visible when we love one another, when we serve one another, when we respect the dignity of one another, and when we reach out to those we might not think are all that connected to us.

And we make this connection visible when we gather intentionally in Christ's name to share Christ's presence with each other. When able to be present at a Communion Service, we turn our attention to the altar. And the very first words out of our mouths will demonstrate that a gathering of at least two is necessary to celebrate God's connection to us and to each other. The priest will say, "The Lord be with you." And you will respond, "And also with you." We will engage in this short conversation in order to notice that we are gathered together in God's presence.

But this is not the end of our awareness of the connecting power of God. This is the training, the exercise for the real work of disciples of Jesus Christ. When we walk from the church, we take with us the desire and the ability to make visible the connective tissue of Christ's presence in all of our relationships.

We go forth in the name of Christ, not to divide, but to gather. We go forth in the name of Christ, not rejecting the chance to form a bond, but rejoicing that the connective tissue of God's presence stretches forth from us, seeking the lost and the lonely. We go forth in the name of Christ, not as delegates of an absent saviour, but as beacons of the light of Christ, which fills the space between people and pulls them closer together. Christ's presence at the very centre of our lives should make us shine out in the world so that those around us can see Christ through our words, our actions, our acts of service, through all that we do and say. A challenging thought – but precisely what we are called to do and be.

And so I do not hesitate to conclude this Reflection with the words: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Revd Tony Meek