

Gospel *Matthew 18.15-20*

Jesus spoke to his disciples. ¹⁵‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. ¹⁸Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

¹⁵‘If another member of the church sins against you’ or, in the words of the New International Version, ‘If your brother sins against you’

Which of us has not had to cope with that at one stage or another in our lives – a situation when someone close to us, be it a brother or sister, partner or friend has wronged us. I would suspect that even as I speak old wounds may be coming to the surface – memories not only of hurts, maybe also regrets at how we handled it.

There are few issues that raise more anguish in life. The whole issue of dealing with conflict, living with conflict, moving on from conflict is one that lies at the heart of the Gospel. For the Bible makes it clear on more than one occasion that this is a measure of how deeply we have understood the magnitude of God’s love for us in Christ.

If your brother sins against you – now let us be clear before we go any further, we can be on either side of that equation.

If your brother sins against you – how do we react? Our reaction is governed by hurt feelings. In our pain we may either shout or maintain a stony silence. The effect is the same – to establish a distance between ourselves and the one who has hurt us. That is understandable. That is a very human reaction.

But let us have a look at a better way, at what Christ is asking us to do. In the verses immediately preceding our Gospel reading, we read the Parable of the Lost Sheep, of the shepherd who goes off and hunts for his lost sheep until he finds it. A Parable that speaks of the lengths that God will go to to seek out the lost.

Now the first thing that I notice about our Gospel reading is that the fact that the object of the whole exercise is reconciliation. Who is to take the initiative? It is the one who has been hurt. As it was the Father who sought us out in Christ, so we are to be the ones who take the initiative. Not that we are to dodge the issues, to pretend that the hurt did not happen.

¹⁵‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. *Matt 18:15*

Now he also assumes responsibility for resolving this issue; he also must be a partner in reconciliation.

Our Gospel reading provides a format within which our conflicts can be resolved, in which others are drawn in to assist in the reconciliation. I think of words of St Paul; ‘If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.’ *Rom 12:18*. Jesus says, if at the end he will not listen, ‘treat him as a pagan or a tax collector.

That at first seems to say; ‘Wash your hands of him, have nothing else to do with him.’ There is something comforting about that; it enables me to draw a line.

But then a little voice inside me asks, ‘How did Jesus treat the pagan and the tax collector?’ Did he cut off all contact? No. He went and he ate with them, he offered fellowship to them. That is one of the things that marked him off from the Pharisees. Then I think again of the relentless search of the shepherd for the lost sheep until he finds it. To treat the person as a pagan or a tax collector is not to draw the line – the fellowship may be broken (and we may have to accept that) but I, for my part, must always be open to reconciliation with the one who has wronged me.

The challenge is emphasised by the passage that follows on from the passage we read today – this will be our reading for next week – the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Relieved of a massive debt by his master, he proceeds to extract the last penny from a fellow servant who owed him but a small amount. The unmerciful servant failed to recognise that the relief of his debt, one so huge that he could not hope to pay, had any bearing on his attitude to a fellow servant.

We will confess with fervour that Christ died for our sins – yet will continue to nurse grievances. Why is this? Could it be that we still have nagging doubts about our own forgiveness – that it still seems just too good to be true, that we are forgiven in the Cross of Christ.

Or could it be that there is still just a touch of self righteousness – Christ may have died for my sins – but my brother's sins are far more serious.

The Pharisee felt that he was right with God, he obeyed the Law in all its detail – so he felt perfectly justified in passing judgement on one who fell short of his high standards. Whereas Jesus taught that no-one, not even the pagan and the tax collector, was beyond redemption. The Pharisee shunned all contact with the sinner, lest he be defiled. Jesus reached out in love that he might repent and be redeemed.

Jesus says, of the one who has wronged us; 'If he refuses to listen treat him as you would a pagan and a tax collector.' Do we treat him as the Pharisee would, secure in our own self-righteousness – or do we treat him as Jesus would, remaining open to future reconciliation. I think it sad, that as followers of Christ, we should so often demonstrate some of the less attractive features of the Pharisees.

Quite apart from that – I spoke at the beginning of the anguish that can come from conflict with one close to us. To prolong the conflict is to continue the anguish. The way of Christ seems more difficult, but it is in fact the way of healing – it is in fact the better way.

May Christ, who calls us along the path of healing and reconciliation grant us grace to follow in his path.