

## Pentecost 14 6 September 2020

Matthew 18:12-20

Contemplatio: Rev'd Michael Wood

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Today's Gospel is about conflict in the Christian community and how we handle it.

It's a very touchy and difficult subject but one that we cannot and must not avoid.

It would be very surprising if, throughout our lives of church going, one of two things have not happened to us:

**Firstly**, we may have found ourselves terribly offended by something that someone else has done to us or said to us – and rather than say anything we just harbour a long and deep seated grudge – and so rather than being able to love the other person, we make do with a kind of painful tolerance of that person.

**Secondly** – we might have been offensive to someone else in the church. Such offence can even sometimes be grave – for example, Christians have been known to steal from each other. Christians have also been known to turn a blind eye to major crime within their own families, or circle of friends, or churches – the most heinous example of which has been turning a blind eye to children sexual abuse. People might turn blind eyes or fail to confront bad behaviour for kinds of reasons, all of which serve to lessen our discomfort with having courageous conversations.

So what happens when truth needs to be confronted? Happily the gospel reading today actually gives us some pretty good practical advice. But rather than simply treat the gospel as a 1<sup>st</sup> century version of a self-help book about how to have courageous conversations, we will want to reflect theologically on this question of conflict. And, of course, to reflect theologically means to reflect Christologically – through the lens of Christ.

The basic elements of what a self help book might describe as a courageous conversation are present here. That is:

- (i) Don't leave conflict festering – if you have a concern with someone go and talk to them about it rather than talk behind their back, or bottle it up inside
- (ii) Initially talk to the person one to one – that is, create conditions of safety where the other person will not be publicly humiliated or shamed.
- (iii) If they don't initially hear you, deny what is going on or refuse to engage, then don't give up – go and get some support from others in the community, and make a joint approach. It may be that the person has in fact gone into response to shame called withdrawal. This was particularly acute in the ancient world where to be separated from the social system was the worst possible punishment. When Jesus advocates bringing two or three other people into the picture it is likely touching on the need for a community based re-incorporation.
- (iv) And finally, there is this curious and what appears to be pretty hard line about treating intransigent people like you would treat tax-collectors and sinners – and what this might mean we will come back to in a moment.

So how does this all this pan out when we look through a Christological lens?

If you are anything like me, when we first hear this text we are very likely to put ourselves into the position of the righteous person, who needs to deal with someone else who is the problem. Funny how we do that, isn't it. Isn't it strange how we rarely conceive of ourselves as part of the problem?

The point of the story seems be that if we are having a difficulty with someone, then we go and talk to them. This is precisely what God does with us in the person of Jesus. God shows up in our lives – God comes and talks to us. God invites us to LISTEN to him.

*Verse 16: “now if you brother (or sister) sins, go and talk with him, between you and her, privately. If she **listens to you**, your gain your sister (or brother)”*

The word 'listen' is repeated four times.

Does not this sound rather like verse 12:

*“if there is any man to whom a hundred sheep belong, and one of them wanders off, will he not leave the 99 upon the hillside and go in search of the one that has strayed?”*

Rather than our natural inclination to hunt out sinners – problem people in our community who have wandered from the path – this whole bit of advice about how we deal with conflict in a community is set within the context of a God who seeks us out. God looking for us in our loneliness, in our shame filled isolation from the community – whether self-imposed or imposed by the community.

We are asked to shift our mindset. If we approach someone else who we perceive to be a “problem”, it might help to remember that we ourselves have experienced isolation and that God is the one who gently brings us back to a deep sense of our own value.

This, attitude or mindset of humility and compassion sets the context for community discipline. We can't let destructive behaviour in a community continue – it has to be named and addressed. If necessary we need to do this with the support of others (what the text refers to as ‘two or three witnesses’).

*Verse 19-20 “Again...I tell you, if two among you agree on earth concerning everything they request (that is requests made to someone to stop their destructive behaviour), whatever that is, it shall come to pass for them, coming from my Father in the heavens. For where there are two or three (that is, witnesses) who have gathered in my name, I am there in their midst”.*

Taken within it's context, this verse has absolutely nothing to do with asking for anything we want in Jesus name and being given it (Lord, please give me a new BMW, in Jesus name)....it is all about how we sensitively, and with humanity, in community, approach differences, conflict or even destructive behaviour and deal with in a Christ-like way.

The final bottom line is even more challenging to our desire for control. Jesus says: *“if the person refuses to listen even to the assembly, let him be to you as the Gentile or the Tax Collector”.*

And how does Jesus approach Gentiles and Tax Collectors? We have two prominent examples in Matthew's gospel?

Firstly – Matthew himself, who was an ex Tax Collector

And, from the reading a couple of weeks ago, The Canaanite Woman, who successfully changes Jesus's mind.

So even faced with the most hard core difference or intransigence, Jesus swings the story right back to God's compassionate search for the lost sheep.