

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 23 Year A 2020

Perhaps one of the hardest things to come to accept in the life of the church is that it is not perfect. One of the things that can most disillusion people in their belonging to the church is that all the issues, dramas, failings and complexities of ordinary human life in fact carry themselves into our church life. This truth can turn people off their faith completely, cause people to leave, or to not commit to the life of faith at all. In part, because we come to the church with so much hope, so much idealism. We want – so desperately – for it to be something else, something better. But too often it is just a disappointment: a painful realisation that all the messy business of life and human sinfulness finds its way even here...

The Gospel writer Matthew is well aware of this problematic dynamic. Already in our exploration of this gospel over the course of this year the evangelist has presented us with two images to help us think about this question: the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the great haul of fish. The ‘net’ of the church captures all fish both good and bad; the weeds are allowed to grow alongside the wheat until the last when they are separated and dealt with. The message in both being one of patience and forbearance. In the gospel placed before us today, a further angle is presented to us. And it takes as its starting point this position of generosity. For Matthew, as we will hear in the gospel next week, the church is place where *forgiveness* is at a premium. And in what we hear today the principal goal of dealing with sin and offence is *reconciliation*. It is not about one-up-manship. It is not about keeping score or holding grudges. It’s not about keeping a record of complaints or to exclude those with whom differ. It is about keeping the community together, restoration, reconciliation. In other words, just one more expression of Jesus’ central ministry of *healing*.

At the same time, as the gospel also makes quite clear today, it’s not restoration at any cost. This is why this gospel *must be* held alongside Matthew’s earlier dealing with this question in the two parables I mentioned. In the Sermon on the Mount, the evangelist reminds us that the church is the community which is to ‘surpass righteousness’. A high ideal is kept before us. Like any community, the church cannot simply turn a blind eye to those who constantly - knowingly or unknowingly - act or live contrary to the values central to its identity. Now there are plenty in the church whose approach is to ignore problem areas, to shrug shoulders, to say that it’s not their business, that it’s just human nature, that we don’t want to rock the boat, etc. etc.

But as the gospel reminds us, it is not peace and harmony at all cost, because that only leads to a shallow community, to a community which avoids conflict and difficult conversations. Such communities will not withstand when the true time of test comes. And not peace and harmony at all cost because that will also lead to an insidious compromising of truth. Too often we think that just ignoring or even openly accommodating (indeed, often enough, celebrating!) people's sins and failings is what will make us more attractive and relevant. The Anglican via media – a blessing and a gift in some instances – but on this point its great weakness. Simply choosing the path of least resistance is *not* the path that leads to truth.

Despite the idealism, and hope and indeed optimism with which we *should* live out our life of faith, Matthew reminds us we also need a good dose realism. No community can simply look past serious disagreement or grievances or resentments without there being a serious detriment to our shared life. There must be structures in place to deal with those things which cause injury to others.

The gospel, then, presents such a path: a graduated structure for correction and reconciliation. And, as we see, the goal here is to 'win' the errant brother or sister. The structure is one which meant to preserve them from public shame. That's why the first steps are at the interpersonal level: one on one. Again, not to prove who is right or wrong. Not to score points. Not even to preserve the purity of the church. But to 'win' them back, for the sake of restoration, for the sake of healing. As Matthew shows us, we win them back by taking the issue seriously, by bringing them to an understanding of the matter, an understanding that will result in a deeper awareness. In the ideal Matthew presents, it becomes a moment of conversion. We might say, it become a 'growth opportunity' for all concerned, by having the hard conversation, by listening to each other, by *accompanying* the person toward truth and reconciliation.

But the important condition of this structure, this process toward reconciliation, is given us at the very end of the gospel passage: *where two or three gather in my name, there am I in the midst*. This little verse naturally enough is a favourite of those who seek assurance for small prayer gatherings, worship in intimate settings. It is a text which seems to favour the introvert: a word of blessing for those who want to avoid large gatherings... And all that may be true. But in the context we are considering today, we must see it in direct relation to that process of dealing with error and offence and of that journey to reconciliation and restoration.

As soon as we have two or three people we have a community. And on issues the church must face, the community is *to seek a common mind: if two of you on earth agree on anything...* We are to bring our issues – all our complaints and grievances; conflicts and disagreements – to God in prayer. In the text today, *heaven itself* is being called as witness. It is a witness to the agreement, the common mind, the church comes to.

Too often the way issues are settled with in the church is by those who have loudest voice, or by those who can swing the most influence. Sometimes it's, 'well, this is way we always deal with this problem.' Or we look to the people in power to make a ruling. In Anglican polity we think the greater number of votes at synod or indeed parish council is how issues are to be dealt with. We fall on these things because they are easier. We fall on these formalised systems and procedures because they excuse us from the much harder work envisaged in the gospel. Because this works requires spiritual maturity. It requires of us to let go of worldly systems of power and of influence, of judgement, and of decision making. Much easier to turn to the leader or ask for a show of hands than *as a community* commit to the time and discipline of *prayerful discernment*. In the gospel vision we are to seek a common mind, which is *not* the same thing as majority vote, or submitting even to legitimate authority.

The path of discernment, of prayerful listening, is much harder. This is why big decisions in churches, which inevitably involve conflict and disagreement, should take a long time. People get impatient. 'Just make a decision', they say. But this is exactly what we *can't* say, if we are going to take the principle laid out here seriously. And on the *big issues* we cannot make the fatal mistake that the decision a particular branch of the church and even a smaller localised expression of it, can pass as 'the mind of the church'. For those of us who confess faith it the church catholic ought realise a much bigger game is at play.

The church cannot survive in permissiveness, in an 'anything goes' kind of way. But nor is exclusion and shame to be the first course of action when things go awry. The gospel reminds us that Christ is inviting himself into our decision making, our conflict resolution, our paths to reconciliation. It means there should be more than a little holy and humble respect in our decisions. Yes, the gospel prompts us to take issues of conflict and division seriously. But we are not to rush to the seat of judgement. Instead, Christ himself is invited into the process. And whatever the challenge of that might be, to are to welcome him into our conversations. Amen.