

Sermon - Jesus' presence in reconciliation

Based on Matthew 18.10-20 (NRSV)

Chapter 18: community behaviour

- The whole of chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel account is effectively a single discourse, by Jesus.
- So today's reading jumps into the middle of it, the middle third, and next Sunday looks at the final third.
- Nevertheless, it is appropriate to have an understanding of the whole of the chapter so as to provide the right context to look at today's part.
- Chapter 18 is intentionally focused on how the gathered community of disciples - the *Ekklesia*, or Church - should interact with each other in the context of community.
- For convenience here is a dot-point summary of the whole of the chapter:
 1. In response to the question: '*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*', Jesus shows his disciples a child - representative of anyone who might be considered worth less than others - and says that those who become humble like the child are the ones who are greatest.
 2. He warns those who harm the faith relationship of others - especially the others who might be regarded as having less worth - and denounces this behaviour.
 3. Jesus then gives the parable of the lost sheep, about actively looking for those who are outside of community, and including them.
 4. And then, conversely, describes how to address misbehaviour within the faith community.
 5. Finally, as we will engage with next week, Jesus answers Peter's question about the extent of forgiveness with the parable of the unforgiving slave.

If another sins...

- So it is in the context of the whole of this teaching that we now come to today's sermon focus, the second half of today's passage, which is about resolving disputes in the church.
- Indeed, in recent times this parish has agreed to a dispute resolution process based on what Jesus outlines here.
- It starts with verse 15: '*If another member of the church sins against you ...*'
- The earliest texts we have suggest either this or the slightly different: '*If another member of the church sins ...*' - suggesting that the sin does not need to directly involve the person who is called to address it.
- A useful working definition of sin is that it is anything that damages relationship, whether it is our relationship with God, with others, with God's creation, or even how we relate to ourselves.
- For this particular reading, the focus is on whatever damages relationships with others in the church community.

Working towards resolution

- Jesus gives us the injunction to take responsibility for addressing the matter directly with the person who has caused the damage.
- Jesus gives each of us this responsibility, not just some of us.
- And gives us the responsibility to go directly to the person who has caused the damage - not to go to someone else first, because that would be deeply unkind to the person who had done wrong.
- Just because a person has done the wrong thing, this is not an excuse to treat them dishonourably and of less worth: Jesus had previously spoken about the need to engage with others with an attitude of humility, and not regarding ourselves as having greater worth than the person who has caused damage.

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- Verse 15 ends with Jesus saying that if the other person listens to you, then the matter has been addressed and reconciliation achieved.
- The implication is that they not only listen, but hear and engage constructively with what you have to say, and work through the matter so that both of you can arrive at the point whereby you are in agreement that the matter has been resolved.
- And, of course, that should then be the end of the matter: Jesus highlights this in next week's Gospel reading when he emphasises the priority of forgiveness.

Resolution through support

- There are of course times when maybe the person who has sinned is ashamed at being called to account, and does not want to admit to having committed their unkindness, and maybe even persists in their unkindness.
- Jesus then says that the matter still needs to be addressed, but that this should now include one or two others, so that the interaction can be witnessed and supported.
- This has a number of benefits:
 1. Firstly, it can help ensure that you, as the one who is upset with the person responsible for the unkindness - that you have the right perspective. Involving others can help ensure that you aren't going off track yourself.
 2. Secondly, it can help the perpetrator of the unkindness recognise that the matter is not just a subjective personality clash, but something that is objectively wrong.
 3. Thirdly, it should also provide both the accuser and the accused with support in achieving reconciliation.
- Again, it requires humility on the part of everyone involved: they all need to recognise that none of them is of greater worth than any of the others.
- In addressing the particular sin, humility is remembering that while only that person has perpetrated that particular unkindness, we are all sinners - we all stumble and fall short of God's high standard of love.
- And, of course, if resolution and reconciliation is achieved, then that is the end of the matter, and this does not need to be spoken about with others - because people are sadly inclined to overlook the resolution that has been achieved and treat either the forgiven wrongdoer or the reconciled accuser as if the matter was unresolved, which is often more damaging than the original offence.

Involving the whole community

- Jesus recognised that even involving a couple of others may not achieve resolution, and so - because an unresolved matter like this then impacts on the wellbeing of the whole community - it becomes relevant and necessary for the whole community to be involved.
- All the points made about involving just a few others still apply, but they now apply to everyone in that community.
- Jesus then continues with injunction '*if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector*' (Matthew 18.17)
- I don't know about you, but I find this to be quite discomforting.
- Church communities through the ages have handled this in different ways, from ex-communication or shunning, to completely ignoring it because no-one wants to address conflict and disagreement.
- Quite often, whichever way it is addressed or not addressed, the process that the members of a church community actually follow can often prove to be more damaging than the original problem - usually because some people prioritise selfish divisiveness rather than prioritising their unity in Christ.

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Refusing reconciliation

- Reflecting on the position of tax-collectors in Jesus' time gives some helpful insight.
- These were Jews who collaborated with the Roman oppressors to collect the Roman taxes from their fellow Jews.
- They allowed themselves to become ritually unclean - ceremonially unworthy of coming before God in worship - in order to behave treasonously towards their worshipping community for their own gain.
- And this describes the kind of church member who refuses to participate in reconciliation when it is needed.
- Because the whole purpose of Jesus' ministry, and his life and death, was to enable reconciliation between us and God, and between each other.
- Reconciliation *is* the Way of Jesus.
- So to wilfully refuse reconciliation with our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, is to betray the body of Christ - just like the tax-collectors that Jesus referred to.
- I don't think Jesus is telling us to make such a person unwelcome, but rather telling us to acknowledge the reality that the person has wilfully stopped being one of his followers, and therefore is no longer functioning as a member of the Church.
- As Jesus said, they are like Gentiles to Jews - no longer of the faith.
- They have excluded themselves, and we are called upon to acknowledge that reality.

Possible consequences

- There are two consequences that are equally important to note.
- Firstly, there are sometimes matters of dispute - not about the sin of unkindness, but where people are divided in the discernment of God's will - and in good conscience feel unable to continue with a different prevailing decision.
- If they decide that the only way forwards for them is to leave their church community, it is nevertheless always worth pursuing a reconciliation of spirit.
- That is, that people should allow themselves to agree to disagree, so that all malice and ill will is reconciled, and people can part still wanting each other to be blessed with God's peace.
- Not seeking this kind of reconciliation can cause ongoing damage, whereas achieving this kind of reconciliation can release people on both sides to grow further into God's grace.
- Secondly, the point about the tax-collectors is that at any time they could choose to behave differently.
- Luke's Gospel account describes short-statured Zacchaeus, a chief tax-collector, encountering Jesus and, as a result, repenting of the wrongs he had done, and promising redress to any he had defrauded. (*Luke 19.2-9*)
- Indeed, Jesus then makes the same observation about saving the lost as he does at the end of his parable about the lost sheep.
- And so it is appropriate that we have the same attitude as Jesus towards any who choose to avoid reconciliation, and to be open to them changing their hearts about being reconciled in order to participate as members of the body of Christ again.

Jesus is present in the process

- I am going to conclude with a reference to the final verses from this passage.
- Through the whole of the process that Jesus describes, he keeps using the formula: *if a thing happens then respond in such a way, if another thing happens then respond in the next way.*
- At the end of the process Jesus continues with the same formula:

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'if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' (Matthew 18.19-20)

- This unity in prayer is thus understood to be a fundamental part of any reconciliation process.
- Jesus expects us, as his followers, to be committed to praying through any disagreements, and throughout the process to be turning firstly to him.
- Jesus gives us the reassurance that when we do this, and are in agreement, then he is present with us in these situations.
- And churches discover that once any unkindness in their faith community is addressed in Jesus' name, with honesty and humility, then the whole community is strengthened, and actually grows in faith.
- Jesus becomes more tangibly present amongst them.