

Reflection for Trinity 14. Matthew 18: 15-20

It is interesting that if two people produce a report on something they have heard, it may not be exactly the same, simply because, try as we might, we tend to put our own slant on how we hear things. This passage from Matthew could well be a case in point. That is to say that maybe there is a bit of Matthew intermingled with his telling of the event.

The original Greek text says that if a 'brother sins against you'; in the effort to be more inclusive, brother becomes 'a member of your church'. A brother or sister indicates a member of a family, a closer relationship than simply a member of the church, indicating a closer relationship than that which can occur within a church family although not always.

The crux of this passage is reconciliation. Reconciliation often means facing up to a reality, rather than pretending it just did not happen. So, for example, someone might come to me and say, 'did you realise that what you said or did was hurtful or damaging?' It may be that it was unintentional. Once that is realised apologies can be made and the matter is forgiven and forgotten. The suggestion is made that if an initial one-to-one visit does not have the desired effect, perhaps because the perpetrator is unwilling to accept the misdemeanour, then an approach made by several people might be helpful. The passage is suggesting that if this does not work, then the offender should be dragged before the church and if he does not listen, then should be treated as an outcast. It is at this point that it could be that Matthew has put his own slant on things, that Matthew is talking, rather than Jesus. This smacks far more of judgement than reconciliation. It has been used in the past as such and not always with the desired effect. If we read on to the verses the lectionary misses out, Peter asks, 'How many times must I forgive my brother?' Jesus' reply of 'seventy times seven' could be counted as infinity. Forgiveness is unlimited and judgement belongs to God, not a self-righteous Church Council.

It is important that we work hard to reconcile difference, to heal past hurts. In doing so we often need to face up to unpleasant truths. We have to face up to facts, not simply paper over them. As we work on this we have to remember the story of the woman taken in adultery: Those without sin can cast the first stone! There can be few of us who, given the chance to press the rewind button, would not be thankful to retract something that we said or undo an action that we now regret.

Healing, reconciliation and understanding need to be within the concepts of Christian principles - love must be our guiding light. Vengeance, punishment and judgement do not belong to us.

*Dear God,
Please help us learn to forgive,
even when society tells us the best thing to do is get even.
Grant us patience and understanding,
and help us act out of love and kindness
rather than hate and anger.
Grant us peace and give us more forgiveness than we think we need.
In your name we pray,
Amen.*