

An Address by Howard Friend – 6th September 2020, 13th Sunday after Trinity

Dealing with Sin in the Church

That's the heading given to this bit of Matthew in my Bible.

Surely not – you say – Sin in the Church – whatever next.

Puts me in mind of Lady Macbeth's famous one liner, when King Duncan is discovered murdered

What – in our House?

Must be a difficult line to deliver that one – with a straight face. Much easier by far to wring one's hands and exclaim - out out damned spot. (Will not all the perfumes of Arabia sweeten this little hand. You'd never guess I did Macbeth for O level would you?)

But leaving aside Lady Macbeth's disingenuous words. This passage, with the heading – Dealing with Sin in the Church – is a Protocol of sorts, it's a step by step guide to solving a problem. If it were computerised we'd probably call it an algorithm.

Now, where've I heard that word recently?

I have to say the best story of that exam marking algorithm fiasco for me concerned a young A level student who wrote an essay, a sort of dystopian fiction of how it can all go wrong. She got it absolutely right – of course – spot on. The irony is she was one of those downgraded. I think St Andrews, her first choice, did give her a place. If I were the Head of English there I'd throw in a Bursary .

Protocols, algorithms have a place – but – and it's a big but – they are often misapplied. And then they're labelled mutant – as we know.

Let me tell you a true story to illustrate this.

When we first went to Malawi in 1983 we were part of a start-up church in the capital, Lilongwe. It was a very exciting venture combining many different expat nationals and Malawians. It is now totally Malawian led and goes from strength to strength.

In those early days a young unmarried woman called Madalo - who attended our house group - became pregnant. Problem – how to deal with sin in the Church.

Remember Malawi was and is a socially conservative country, and Aids was kicking off just then. Sexual sin always gets the headlines doesn't it. I wonder why?!

We weren't part of the leadership at that stage but were frankly horrified at the harsh way she was treated, particularly by our Malawian friends interestingly – In line with the scriptural protocol we've just read - she was asked to leave the church. To add insult to injury we subsequently discovered that the father was one of the deacons – he stayed.

The right way to deal with Sin in the Church. I don't think so. You might reasonably say that step one in any such algorithm should be 'Take the plank out of your own eye'

However there are socially and theologically conservative churches around the world, even in this country, who adopt a similarly rigid approach to church discipline and justify their actions with reference to this piece of Scripture.

Here's why I think they're misguided. Ironically it's because of not reading the Scripture properly. (Not reading enough of it). This passage is sandwiched between Jesus's story of the lost sheep who the Good Shepherd spends his time searching for, leaving the other 99 behind. And Peter's question about how many times should I forgive someone who sins against me? He asks Up to 7 times? (obviously a protocol type) – Jesus answers 70 x 7. In other words it's not about protocols it's about, love, compassion and mercy. Prioritising the so-called Lost Sheep.

If our primary motive is not love in this or any situation - then we're heading down the wrong algorithm. Discipline must be tempered with mercy and forgiveness.

That approach wasn't at all apparent in that Church's handling of Madalo. There is a Happy End to that story by the way. We always kept in contact with her and her daughter Kinaoue. The last time we saw them in 2016, both were married with children and thriving - in another church.

Now there is an equal and opposite error, another Protocol misapplication lesson which haunts our church communities though isn't there. The child sex-abuse scandal.

The irony – the tragedy - here is that we didn't apply the protocol rigidly enough with disastrous consequences for the victims – and the church's reputation.

Let's go back to the Scripture a moment. That chapter starts off with Jesus saying we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven – he then goes on – in an almost eerily prescient way to warn that it would be better for those who cause children to sin to have a millstone hung around their necks and be drowned in the depths of the sea. Such things will happen he says but woe to them who perpetrate such sin.

The church's mistake in dealing with the child sex abuse scandal was in not applying the protocol - being too merciful to the perpetrators (partly through ignorance of the nature of such abuse) – but also most worryingly in ignoring the effect on the victims and attempting to limit reputational damage.

Dealing with sin in the Church. Not an easy subject. You may say but we're not the only institutions to have been affected by this particular sin. That's true – but - we had a protocol, an algorithm, a warning from our Lord himself in Holy Scripture – and we didn't apply it wisely.

Just a word about our attitude to such abuse. It's tempting to take some of the language of that passage: Millstone / bottom of the ocean and adopt a vengeful / vigilante approach. But our approach should primarily be one of love and compassion. Love combined with wisdom concerning protection of the vulnerable. There is a balance between Love and Mercy on one side and Justice on the other. Does a Protocol / an Algorithm help? – I would say yes - if applied with wisdom.

In conclusion may I suggest a verse from the Old Testament Prophet Micah as a shortened guide in such matters. That is dealing with sin in the church

Micah 6 vs 8

What does the Lord require of us:

That we Act justly, Love mercy and Walk humbly with our God. Remembering always to take the plank from our own eye first.

Amen