

Trinity 13 Education Sunday: Resolving Conflict

Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-11; Romans 13:8- end; Matthew 18:15-20

Today is Education Sunday presenting us with an opportunity to celebrate and pray for all places of learning both here in our Parish and throughout the country. It's appropriately placed at the start of the academic year when pupils may be starting in new schools. It was my privilege to take the act of collective worship for St David's Primary School on Thursday morning in St Michael's Church. I began by asking the children what they thought made a great school. My expectations were that I would get answers like "good teachers", "excellent facilities", "exciting playgrounds" or even "good exam results". Nothing like that! My first answer from one of the very young children was, "All the friends in my class." And then, "A small school like ours where we all know each other". The older ones used more sophisticated language, "Good vibes of warmth and friendship". What a credit to St David's School that the children recognised the importance of relationships. I'd taken along with me some lego pieces, or rather their larger counterparts, duplo, so we could pray that God has made us all like lego parts, different sizes, colours and with different uses and yet like lego we can all fit together to make our world a safer and better place.

As a headteacher one of the greatest problems you face is how you ensure good discipline in the school, especially when those friendships break down, when children fall out with each other, when bullying or aggressive behaviour occurs. A great school has clear boundaries and well developed strategies for dealing with such issues. This morning's readings suggest how the church can move forward when it has to deal with similar events, with conflict, with wrongdoing, with manipulation, with self interest, with abusing each other, with abusing God. The prophet Ezekiel and Matthew's gospel give some strong counsel about speaking up and speaking out. Paul writing to the early church in Rome informs them that love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour, so love is the fulfilment of all the laws.

Matthew is the only gospel writer to use the word "church". This morning's gospel comes from chapter 18 which is devoted to teaching about the church. It has been called "the Book of the Church" in which we are reminded about the spiritual health of each individual, for if one sheep goes astray the shepherd devotes himself to reclamation, so that no one is lost. Immediately following this reading Peter asks Jesus how many times he should

forgive another member of the church who has sinned against him. Seven times? Jesus replies, "Not seven times, but seventy seven" or, in some translations, "seventy times seven". So it appears that Matthew and Paul's advice for resolving conflict in the church is to speak out and confront it, showing the love of Christ in being prepared to forgive. Not easy! But remember, Jesus says, "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them". I always thought this meant where two or three were gathered for worship, but in this context it means where two or three are gathered in dispute, I am there. That's well worth remembering.

The gospel suggests three processes in reproofing a church member whom you believe has wronged you. Firstly go and have it out with him or her on a one to one basis. Start privately and see if that works. If it doesn't, then bring in the support of one or two others to act as witnesses. If that also fails, it needs to be brought to the attention of the whole church community. The very last resort is to treat them as a Gentile or tax collector, which means to exclude them. The intention is never to humiliate, always to reconcile in the spirit of love and forgiveness. I remember how difficult it was, when considering the exclusion of a pupil, to balance the needs of the individual between the needs of the whole school. At the time of the Reformation there was fierce debate about whether the church had the right to excommunicate. Fortunately discussions now are more likely to be about how churches can encourage true discipleship and authentic Christian living.

These processes of dealing with conflict reveal a remarkable picture of the lengths that Christians must go to produce a healthy community. It appears very practical but is also very optimistic. Speaking up and naming issues on a one to one basis can be more difficult for some than others. Confrontation can be very conciliatory, but dealt with wrongly, it can also be very destructive. Many prefer to seethe in silence or simply paper over the cracks rather than confront. Some may believe it is much easier to pretend there isn't a problem and simply ignore the other person or group or talk to them as little as possible. There may also be a view that Christians should suffer difficulties in silence. Matthew's gospel this morning is clearly saying, "No" to this. Rather if we don't deal with difficulties at an early stage, they can build up into something out of whole proportion to the original event. Get things sorted out earlier rather than later, if we want to head off the worst. William Blake expresses this clearly in his poem "The Poison Tree":

I was angry with my friend:

I told my wrath; my wrath did end.

I was angry with my foe
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

Seeing a person on a one to one basis needs courage, humility and most importantly prayer. The other person may counter accuse. There may indeed be blame on both sides. So who to take with you as witnesses needs to be a genuine reality check on your own judgement. You need to choose people who are prepared to tell you some uncomfortable truths if necessary. And the final act to inform the whole church represents a high and hard challenge with no dramatic promises of success.

However difficult there are, I believe, some home truths which can be taken from this morning's readings. Christian discipleship requires confrontation because the Peace that Jesus has established is based on truth and truth telling. When we offer peace to each other it must be without illusion. If we allow rumour and gossip to spread, if poisonous whispering takes over from the process of confronting and listening, there will be no reconciliation. And be assured Jesus couldn't care less who is right or who is wrong, he's more concerned about the relationship. Papering over the cracks, pretending everything's alright, that the other person hasn't really done anything does not amount to forgiveness. Forgiveness only comes when it is recognised that it did happen, it did really matter and you're going to deal with it and end up loving and accepting one another again. The biggest attitude, the greatest quality that transforms are dealings with others and makes for reconciliation is love. Love builds relationships, fits us together like lego bricks and allows us to have those tough conversations.

What makes a great church? Its building? The number in the congregation? The sparkle of its worship? The quality of its preaching? The beautiful sound of its music? The rigour of its Bible study groups? How much it serves the community? The mark of a great church is the one that knows how to deal with conflict, to reconcile differences and forgive.

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