

## SERMON/REFLECTIONS TRINITY 13 WEEK 23 YEAR A 6 SEPTEMBER 2020

What should we do if a member of the church sins against us? Some people's reaction might be to leave the church: "I'm not going there again!" Most of us prefer not to have a personal conflict with someone else, so we probably won't talk to the offending party. If we decide to stay we'd do our best to avoid him or her in the future. When confrontations do happen in church life they can be pretty messy.

What should we do if a member of the church sins against us? It's too general a question to have a simple answer. It's possible that the sin happens within the church context. It's also possible that it's nothing to do with organised church life: your CCTV picks up that a neighbour has reversed into your gatepost and you both happen to go to church.

In today's gospel, S. Matthew sets out Jesus' teaching on church discipline. It's important as always to read it in context, and we've jumped one and a half chapters since last week's gospel. The present chapter 18 begins with the disciples asking Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus' answer is, "A child." He has stern words for those who cause one of the little ones who believe in him to sin. By 'little ones' he doesn't mean just children by age: he means all church members, whom he commands to become like children. It is a sin to lead others into sin: that is, to tempt them. It is like betraying the trust of a child.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep – how the shepherd goes to seek the one sheep in a hundred that has gone astray. He concludes, "It is not the will of my Father...that one of these little ones should perish." In other words, Jesus wants to bring the sinner back. Concern for the whole community is expressed by caring for its weakest members. That's the equivalent of the well known observation that a society can be judged on how it treats the most vulnerable within it. I could say much about social care, but not today.

Instead, we get to today's passage, which we should read in the light of the themes Jesus has developed about caring for the weak and seeking to restore those who have distanced themselves from the community, perhaps by their actions. They are to be given ample opportunity to repent: a word in private, a word with one or two witnesses, and finally a bringing of the matter before the church. Only if there is still no willingness to repent can they be declared to be outside the Christian community.

But maybe not outside for ever. Jesus gives his followers the power to bind and to loose. In the course of time, and if there is convincing evidence of change, restrictions placed on offending parties can be relaxed. The passage ends with a teaching of Jesus on prayer, intercession. The handful of Christians hearing a charge against an offender can become the two or three gathered in Jesus' name in order to pray, including prayer that sinners may repent.

The context makes it clear that Jesus is giving instructions for conduct which affects the church as a body: conduct which requires a response from the community. He is not suggesting that personal grievances should be brought before the church. However, church members have a duty to act for someone who is being unjustly treated. Jesus addresses this in the parable which follows today's passage: the parable of the unmerciful servant. That will be next week's gospel reading.

It is difficult, maybe impossible, to deduce practical church disciplinary structures from Jesus' words. Different denominations in our own day have their own procedures, and it is important that they run in accord with the laws of the land. Church life and organisation today is vastly different from that of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church for which Matthew wrote his gospel. Most of us will never have to be involved in a formal sense with church discipline. But we can have the good of the Christian

community – the flock – in our hearts. We can ask what effect our words and actions have on ‘the little ones’ – our brothers and sisters in Christ. More positively, we can seek out those who are being neglected, either because of their own actions, or because of others’ indifference. We experience the joy of forgiveness; we can also rejoice when others are restored by God’s grace – and we have a part to play in bringing that grace to them.