

10 September 2023

Matthew 18:15-20 Pastor Fraser Pearce

Sin happens in the Christian community,
And brothers and sisters in Christ can hurt each other
In what they say and do.

When we sin against someone in our church
We can feel as if we are not really Christian at all,
And we can want to avoid the person we hurt,
Or stay away from church, or simply give up in the life of faith.
And if a brother or sister sins against us
We can feel particularly hurt or angry: they should know better.
And we can we can want to strike back at them,
If not to their face, then behind their back.

Jesus knows about the reality of sin among his disciples.
If you read through Matthew's Gospel you'll notice
That he gives us at least three different ways
Of responding to the reality of sin in the church.

Firstly, he gives teaching on what to do
When we have sinned against a brother or sister.
This is what Jesus says: **So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.** Matthew 5

Secondly, he gives us words to use *to God*
When we feel hurt or angry with those who have sinned against us.
So, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray: **And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** Matthew 6

And then there's today's reading:
Jesus tells us what to do in relation to our brother or sister
When they have sinned against us.
That's what we'll be dealing with in the sermon today.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News,
And that is that our Lord Jesus is shaping us to be a community
Where we deal wisely with the reality of sin:
Not letting it go unchecked so that we fall into chaos and conflict,
But also not letting it become an occasion for self-righteous pride
That destroys the life of love.
Jesus gives us the freedom to gain our brother or sister
Back into life in the Christian family.

This is how Jesus starts: **'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.'**

First, notice how Jesus acknowledges the reality of sin *in the church*.

A literal translation of the Greek would be:

'If your *brother* sins against you'

So, here we are speaking

Particularly about sin in the Christian community.

Firstly, Jesus tells us to go to them, and to alert them to the way

That what they said or did has hurt or angered us.

Not to do this publicly, or aggressively,

But privately, brother to brother, sister to sister.

Normally, of course, we don't feel like responding this way.

Normally we mediate about how they have hurt us,

We don't make eye contact with them, and avoid them,

We talk with *others* about what they have done.

But as disciples of Jesus we carry our cross,

And part of this is the practice of letting go of acting like God –

Of letting go as if we are the judge of other people,

And of instead going to them and telling them how we feel.

Just a note at this point.

Just before today's reading Jesus has been dealing

With the question of status in the church,

And about the treatment of children by those in authority.

I would say that Jesus' teaching in today's reading

Is directed at peers: at those in a similar power relationship.

I would not apply this teaching, for example,

To children who have been sexually abused by people

In positions of authority in the church.

I don't think Jesus is saying that little ones have to do this, rather

Jesus gives dire warnings to those in authority

Who would abuse the little ones

OK, back to the text. Jesus goes on:

If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.

I might have thought Jesus would say

'If the member repents...'

But he says, **'If the member listens...'**

Now, as it happens, I think this listening is a part of repentance,

But let's think about what listening actually means in real life.

It means looking at the person speaking to us.

It means focussing our attention on their words.

It means not talking over them –

Especially not butting in with self-justifying comments.

It means being able to say back accurately what we have heard.

If our brother or sister listens to us

This first of all resolves misunderstanding:

Sometimes we feel hurt or angry

Because we have got the wrong end of the stick:

We might even be reacting to things in our past

That have nothing much to do with what the person said or did to us.

Being listened to can make this clear, and bring peace.

But let's say they listen and come to realise

That they have sinned against us,

That what we are saying is reasonable:

They then have the opportunity to ask for forgiveness

And to be reconciled with us.

Jesus says that if this happens we have regained them.

Now Jesus has just told the parable of the lost sheep,

So, the idea is that we find what is lost as we follow Jesus' teaching:

That Jesus does his ministry of finding what is lost *through us*

As we trust him and put his words into action.

All this, by the way, is a normal part of church life.

We should expect that at some stage in our walk of faith

That we will experience the reality of sin in the church –

Either from our sin towards others, or theirs toward us -

And that we will have the opportunity to use our faith

By putting Jesus' words into practice.

When we do this, we find out for ourselves

That Jesus is alive, and that his Spirit brings order and peace.

Now in today's reading Jesus goes on to deal with a reality

That we may experience less, but is not less real for that.

He deals with what to do if our brother our sister will not listen:

If they shut the door on us, or talk over us,

Or refuse to admit that they have done anything wrong.

Jesus says: **But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.**

Again, it is possible, after all, that we ourselves might be wrong,

Or that the other person might need to gain a perspective that comes

From hearing how others view the situation,

And so taking others with us – others who are witnesses to the conflict

Can help bring about peace and reconciliation.

Jesus then talks about a third step in the process: **If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.**

That is, let them be to you

As one outside of the community of disciples:

In Jesus' day tax collectors were unscrupulous traitors to their country

Who cheated their own people: think of Zaccheus.

In Matthew's Gospel, Gentiles are people

Who act only according to human norms,

So, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus says: **And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?**

Matthew 5:47

And in the same sermon he says: **'When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.**

Matthew 6:7

So, if a Christian brother or sister won't listen to the church,

The best thing to do is treat them as people

Who do not know the way of Jesus,

And to exercise together wisdom in how we together

Can bring them back into the life of love.

The fact that the life of reconciled love is a communal reality

Is shown by how Jesus sums up his teaching.

He says: **Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, 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.'**

Notice the context of these words:

It's the context of reestablishing reconciled love

After there has been sin in the Christian community.

When we, as disciples of Jesus, together agree

On what brings harmony and reconciliation,

Then Jesus is among us, then the work of heaven is done on earth.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are not yet at full maturity in the life of faith –

There is sin in the church, here at Bethlehem,

Sin committed by the people, sin committed by the pastor.

But we do not need to give up:

We are free to take up our cross, and go to each other,

Seeking reconciliation, knowing that as we do

Our Lord Jesus is with us. To him be glory in church. Amen!