

September 6th 2020 - Sermon

Matthew 18.15-20

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 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. 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. 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.'

Richard and I are back from our holidays – we've been to Yorkshire and the NE of England enjoying some walking, cycling, food and beer, fossicking and general sightseeing – of course Richard and I couldn't stay away from church life as we visited a couple of cathedrals and ruined abbeys... Durham Cathedral, York Minster and Whitby and Rievaulx Abbeys. They all have many stories to tell – but one that was uppermost in the life of the church was our Anglican founding history – the big split from the Catholic church and the dissolution of the monasteries. This is a major dispute in the life of the church and caused a break up – we are now the Church of England because of this history – and our foundation of what we believe was determined by the big arguments of that day – as to be honest are many of our creeds and statements of belief in our tradition – these creeds are born from disagreements of the day and assert positively what it is that we do agree to and where the lines should be drawn. We see this throughout the church's history and the many denominations we now have bear witness to the many different ideas and interpretations and lines being drawn about what is the right way to follow Jesus and what is not... hopefully we can listen to each other and find new ways to be united – but there are times too where we simply disagree.

Sometimes people think there should be no conflict in church, because Christians should somehow be full of sweetness and light – that we should have total acceptance of the status quo. I remember as a super pious teenager my mum feeling very irritated with me one day and making such a comment after we had a fairly big disagreement – that as a committed Christian I ought to be a more peaceful daughter – I'm sure I probably could have been a little less vehement in my opinions in those days on probably something terribly vital like how long the hem on my school uniform should be – however neither I nor my mum really actually think that Christianity is about peaceful acceptance and total agreement and harmony – we both know from our experience and life at large that it is through our tensions and differences that we come to better understandings – that how we approach those things of difference is what matters most.

Saint Swithuns like all other churches and all families who love each other has had and will continue to have its fair share of disputes and arguments – I am always wary of those families who say they never have disagreements as I wonder if they really do engage with each other or know each other or allow each member a separate identity – lack of disagreement isn't something we should ever aspire to (I don't think) as it shows we are not thinking for ourselves - we really shouldn't be afraid of conflict – in fact conflict and how we approach our differences is what shapes us – I would go so far as to say – it is necessary for our development and growth in faith, hope and love.

It is almost comforting to hear that Jesus talks about conflict in Christian communities as if it is to be expected - and helps us to see that conflict in church is normal and natural. Even better Jesus gives us some helpful guidelines about how we should approach disputes and issues - the main focus is that we should deal with disputes in love, with honesty and showing compassion.

As we all know love, honesty and compassion are rarely elements we see in disagreements - and church conflict is no different. I have seen anger, hurt feelings and resentment about many things in every church where I have worshipped and worked. These seem to be heightened when there is a lack of clear communication. I tend to see two main responses in disputes - there is a tendency to avoid the issues so that we can keep the peace, or alternatively there is an openly hostile and entrenched position that leads to explosions and people threatening to leave church or actually leaving.

If we avoid issues we have a church family who look glossy on the outside but are messed up and going rotten on the inside, or alternatively if we are more obviously broken as a church with openly hostile attitudes we are a church who loses energy and vitality and valuable family members.

So it is important that when there are Church disagreements they should be approached with love and they should not be avoided.

Jesus' advice for us is to be direct and respectful with our communication. If we are struggling with something a church member has said or done, we should not talk behind their back. We should not stage a dramatic public confrontation in church either.

Jesus' advice is that we should take time aside after the initial blow up of feeling and engage in dialogue with whoever we are struggling with.

If that conversation does not resolve things we should create a small group of all parties involved to discern and pray together the way forward. And then if still no progress is made but transparency is to be our guiding principle as we search for a solution as a whole church community seeking reconciliation together.

Having worked in a position where mediation and conflict resolution are fundamentals of my job - I am extremely aware that all parties need to be ready to listen to each other and should attempt some empathy and understanding of the other perspective. Both sides need to feel that they have won in some way as well. At the most basic level - we can't change other people but we can change ourselves - so seeking to restore justice is as much about working on ourselves and our approach to a situation as seeking a change in a situation or hoping for a change in other people.

Some disagreements are so deep that resolution can't be found - and so Jesus says, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

This doesn't mean we can shun people - we should remember how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors before we jump to such a simplistic end point. He went out to them and lived among them - he even allowed the Canaanite woman to soften him into changing his mind about healing her daughter - we heard that story last month and is an important story to keep in mind when we think about how to treat those who we disagree with.

We need to question ourselves - are we really paying attention to the argument our opponent is offering? The example that Jesus gives us is that we should be listening to others - that means properly listening and trying to understand their position with an open mind and a readiness that we might change.

Love, honesty and compassion should be uppermost for us – not blind acceptance to keep the status quo in a vague attempt to be peaceful – listen to each other and make sure everyone is able to make their voice heard – yours too! However much we agree or disagree - may we be bound together with the unbreakable love of Christ - may we never write another person off but strive for healing and resolution instead – and may we all – inclusively - flourish with new life.

Amen