

Morning Worship – Sunday 6th September – Trinity 13

Sermon – Rev Paul Day

Romans 13:8-end
Matthew 18:15-20

It's a real privilege as a vicar to be able to be part of people's family events – christenings, weddings and even funerals. To be able to be alongside families as they celebrate or grieve. As Sarah was saying last week, *being happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep*. But one of the saddest things is when the whole event is overshadowed by a family rift.

Over the years I have taken a number of funerals where there has been a family breakdown – often as a result of a severe disagreement sometimes many years before. In such situations someone is regarded as no longer being part of the family, and there is often a genuine fear that they might turn up at the funeral.

Sadly, it would seem that people often have little idea as to how to proceed when there has been this kind of division or rift. There is a view that any reconciliation can only begin when the offender (if we use such a term) makes a move to say they are sorry. Anything else would show weakness. But that isn't what Jesus teaches – let's have a look.

The passage from Matthew that was our gospel reading this morning is one of those passages that seems quite surprising. It appears to be presenting a harsh view of church discipline. But, as with any Bible passage, we need to see it in its context – in other words have a look at what comes before and after it in the gospel.

And what comes before it is the well known story of the lost sheep, and what comes after it is teaching to Peter on forgiveness being without limit (not seven times, but seventy times seven should you forgive someone), and then the story of the king who forgave his servant a huge debt, only for that servant to refuse to forgive a fellow servant for something small. Surely the emphasis of today's passage, then, is on forgiveness and reconciliation rather than discipline and exclusion.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian faith. We begin just about every act of worship with confession – a prayer for forgiveness. We see Jesus's death on

the cross as being so that our sins – all our wrongdoings, and thoughtless actions and words - can be forgiven by God. And we pray in the Lord's prayer week by week *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*. And yet we find the whole matter of forgiving each other very hard.

A couple of weeks ago we were looking at the incident when Jesus took Peter, James and John aside at Caesarea Philippi. We thought about Peter's confession of faith – You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. After that Peter – Simon as he was then – was given a new name which meant Rock. On this rock will I build my church.

Perhaps we find it surprising that Peter was chosen as the rock. Peter the one always putting his foot in it; Peter the outspoken one; Peter the one who three times denied even knowing Jesus. Perhaps we are surprised that Jesus chose Peter to be the rock despite all this. But maybe, just maybe Jesus chose the unlikely, unqualified Peter to be the rock not despite the fact he messed things up but because he made a mess of things. Jesus chose him because he knew that Peter would deny him, because he knew that Peter would need forgiveness and forgiveness lies at the heart of the gospel message. And who better to lead the church in proclaiming the message of forgiveness than Peter the forgiven one.

There's a huge misconception when we talk about forgiveness to think that it means that whatever has been done doesn't matter, that it isn't important, that it can be disregarded. But that is wrong. Forgiveness accepts that it DID happen, that it DID matter and it IS important. So important that it has to be faced so that there can be the possibility of a future.

A couple of years ago at the Greenbelt festival I was privileged to hear a conversation between Jo Berry and Patrick Magee. Jo Berry's father, Sir Anthony Berry, was one of five people who were killed in the Brighton bombings. Patrick Magee was the IRA man who planted that bomb. Jo now calls Patrick Magee her friend. Let that sink in for a moment. Jo Berry calls Patrick Magee, the man who planted the bomb that killed her father, her friend.

After the terrible death of her father, Jo could have let anger and hatred take root in her heart. But she wanted to find out why Patrick Magee had planted that bomb; what had motivated him to take that action which led to the death of her father. She wanted to understand.

Magee was released under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement in 1999. A year later Jo Berry met him at a friend's house in Dublin. She believes her father would have approved of her actions. She said: "I hope he would have understood and given me his support. I think he would have. I am not a politician but, in my own way I think he'd understand that I am trying to change things."

That meeting was followed by further meetings and a growing understanding from both sides of where the other was coming from. Jo Berry has said "When he planted the bomb he wasn't seeing human beings. It was a strategy, and now he sees wonderful human beings. It has been about him getting his humanity back. That has changed him, definitely."

Jo Berry has said she is wary of using the word forgiveness, but having heard them both speak I would say that the point of forgiveness has been reached. Not because what happened didn't matter, but precisely because it was all so important.

And of course all this means that hatred and anger have not won out in the end; love and understanding have allowed things to move forward, so much so that Jo Berry now runs the Building Bridges for Peace charity, and reconciliation talks have taken her and Magee to places around the world including Palestine, the Balkans, Rwanda and Colombia.

In the chapter of Matthews' gospel we are looking at today Jesus is talking about the importance of forgiveness – yes the importance of God forgiving us and allowing us to be reconciled to him. But also in the realm of human relationships.

In the passage we had today he talks of the steps we might take to bring about reconciliation. Perhaps our focus rests all too easily on the last step - *if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector*. We might imagine someone being thrown out of fellowship; causing a justifiable division in the church. But just suppose for a moment that Jesus have meant something different. Just suppose he was using those terms of gentile and tax collector to remind his followers of how he spent his time and where he often showed his love.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus is berated for spending time with tax collectors and sinners. We hear of stories of him healing Gentiles. He shows practical

concern for the outcast. *I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repent.* Could it just be that Jesus is saying – yes your human efforts at reconciliation might have reached a stalemate. It may be you can't see a way forward. That you feel all you can do is treat the other as an outcast. But there is a way forward – and it's demonstrated in the way that I spend my time with those on the edges. By treating them as people that are made in God's image and that he loves. The way forward is forgiveness.

Such forgiveness is hard; its costly; it takes courage. But the alternative is separation; is hatred and anger and festering mistrust (on both sides). The gospel is about welcoming and breaking down divisions. We cannot and must not wait for the other person to start the process.

Now, I am not in a position to judge the families I spoke about at the beginning. I don't know what they tried to do to resolve the situation. I have no idea if they attempted to understand the other side of the story and begin to work out a way forward. But what I do know is that all too often pride or fear or arrogance or whatever stops those steps from being taken, and therefore allows hatred and anger and mistrust to fester and take over.

Jesus tells many stories about the lost being found – sheep, coins and supremely the lost son. On one level we can see that they illustrate well the way God in Jesus came to find us – individually and collectively – to welcome us home, to offer us forgiveness and a new start. But on another level, they can teach us that in our relationships with each other we should always do all we can to seek a way forward. It's costly, it's painful and it takes courage. Just like it was for Jesus.