

Sermon for Trinity 13, 6th September, 2020

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The Gospel reading introduces us to a challenging situation, “When a brother or sister has wronged you, go and have it out with them...”. It sounds so straightforward, and I guess I am not the only one who inwardly winces at this instruction. But it gets worse. If that doesn’t work, bring in some others, and if necessary, take it to the community! This is not what we usually experience in church life. In my experience, action, when it is taken at all, takes place off-stage, behind the scenes. Perhaps this is why I don’t remember ever hearing a sermon on this passage.

In Church, seeking out someone who has wronged us or someone we see behaving wrongly in some way, is not something we do. Yet in Paul’s letters and in the medieval handbook for pastoral care by Gregory the Great, admonishment is one of the key elements of pastoral care. When I discovered this, I shared it with friends and colleagues who all responded as if I had suggested bringing back tyrannical monsters from the past. Clearly, our culture of ‘niceness’ makes it hard to address difficult topics. The consequences of that failure are serious. As the whole world has seen in the nightmare scandal of covering up rather than disciplining abusive behaviours. Even with more ordinary issues, we shy away from the difficult ones. In doing so, we are behaving/responding as St Paul says, according to the flesh, that is to say we are in the grip of what Walter Wink calls ‘the Domination System’ that lures us into inauthentic ways of living no longer centred on God.

This is the reason for the prophet’s call to be, as we heard in our Old Testament lesson, a sentry to God’s people, calling them to turn from the ways that are not authentic or expressive of their covenant with God. This sentry’s role, I suggest, is what St Matthew is describing in our Gospel reading. I imagine that we all have some experience of acting like this, of taking something up with someone, or of being challenged ourselves, but privately, off-stage, so to speak. And I suspect this is usually about something personal between the two of us. To do the same though about someone’s behaviour as a church member . . . or about how the privileges and responsibilities of exercising authority are carried out . . . Discussion happens of course, but not usually between the interested parties, on-stage, as we might say. But if we can do it with personal matters, privately, might it not be possible to do it with matters to do with our shared life together . . . ? Certainly that is what our readings nudge us, call us, to do. I wonder what would need to happen, so that that could happen constructively ?

A lot of preparatory work would have to be done . . . wouldn't it ? What would that include, do you think ? . . . One thing would be learning for ourselves how it could be a grace-fun experience.

So what would a constructive 'having it out' with a brother or sister look like ? I'm conscious for myself of half-expecting a crushing or humiliating putdown. But of course, if I had in fact wronged a brother or sister in some way, and have that pointed out to me . . . at the least, that is going to be uncomfortable, at the most, I will feel dreadful and appropriately so. What would help such an encounter to be a moment of 'metanoia' or conversion would be that it was done with what Pope Francis calls 'mercy' rather than judgment. Or in such a way, that I can see very clearly how I have wronged my brother or sister- and one reason I can see it clearly is because it is said in a way that opens my eyes to what I have done or not done. Sometimes a direct, angry comment has opened my eyes, at others, it has been a quiet, dispassionate description. Both have shown me, unavoidably and mercifully, how I had wronged the other person. Clearly we could have a very interesting discussion about this, may be you could do that in the breakout groups. I want to end with some words about how such actions can be healing and grace-bearing.

Implicit in all our readings today is the recognition that members of God's people though we are, we are also often turning away from God in the grip of other kinds of wanting or fearing. This is because we ourselves are battle-fields of conflicting wishes and desires, some of which we know v well, and of some, we are blissfully ignorant. Hence the pain/discomfort, when we lose that ignorance!

Discipleship is often described today in terms of journeying, but it's a learning journey where we see the beam in our own eye rather than focusing on the dust in our sister's. But today's Gospel challenges us to perform the sentinel role with our sisters and brothers, and to do so in the spirit of the good shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep and brings them back to join the whole community. This is what sharing the peace looks like in practice tho' it doesn't always feel like it! I remember a sister of one community saying how often visitors commented on how peaceful it was, coming to visit. Often, she said, they say it just when we have been having a really difficult time in community.

Maybe what the visitors sensed was the calm that follows when a difficulty has been faced, alienation has been overcome and reconciliation has occurred. There follows we could say, a win-win situation.