

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 6th September 2020

Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Religious stereotyping is very bad, but sometimes it's hard to resist. If you've ever spent time in a certain kind of evangelical church, you will be familiar with the chill that runs down the spine when somebody offers to 'speak the truth in love' to you. As often as not, it means they're about to say something blisteringly rude and possibly hurtful, and there's nothing you can do about it because Jesus and all the best Christian authorities say that it is a good thing to do.

Well, do they? Yes, it looks like it. In our reading from Matthew 18, Jesus says 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault, when the two of you are alone.' And if that works, great; and if it doesn't, escalate it and draw in one or two other people.

But – and this ties in with what St Paul says in our Romans reading about grounding everything we do in Christian love – try to sort it out within the church community, whatever it is, and without involving external parties or, say, going to the legal authorities – Paul says that in 1 Corinthians. We are, or should be, a community that is open to listening to one another with respect and kindness and goodwill. Sometimes we are not, and sometimes external authority has to put the church right; but it seems that's not how it's meant to be.

As so often, Jesus hasn't just invented this. Leviticus tells God's people that they should care about justice and wellbeing among themselves, and that being able to speak out freely and fairly is part of that. Chapter 19: 'You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not go around as a slanderer among your people; you shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour or you will incur guilt yourself; you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.'

It's one of those places where the Old Testament's Ten Commandments meet the Great Commandment that Jesus gives us in the gospels: love the Lord your God with all that is in you, and love your neighbour as yourself. Paul brings them together too, in our reading from Romans.

So: it is a call to radical honesty. The kind of thing the church and society at large always say they could do with more of. But how do we make that into a Jesus-like way of relating to each other, and not just a licence to be rude?

I think the rest of Matthew 18 makes sense of it. The chapter starts with Jesus' call to humility. 'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,' Jesus says. If we are humble, we can hear things that are genuinely for our good, without being defensive or feeling we have to react back.

It goes on to say that being considerate of where different people are at is important. Avoid making stumbling blocks for others. It says how much the wellbeing of each person matters. Like a single lost sheep, that the shepherd goes in search of, and rejoices when he finds it.

And it says – this is at the heart of our reading – that if you've got an issue with someone, don't just focus on the issue; keep the relationship with that person front and centre, because that's what really matters. So, Jesus says, if you can, first talk privately, Hear their story. Don't just go on hearsay.

The book of Ecclesiasticus is quite late – 2nd century BC – and it's fairly Greek and philosophical, so it only makes it into the Apocrypha not the Old Testament, but it's very wise and wonderful, and it expands on all this. Chapter 19:

Like an arrow stuck in a person's thigh, so is gossip inside a fool.

Question a friend: perhaps he did not do it; or if he did, so that he may not do it again.

Question a neighbour; perhaps he did not say it; or if he said it, so that he may not repeat it.

Question a friend, for often it is slander; so do not believe everything you hear.

A person may make a slip without intending it. Who has not sinned with his tongue?

Question your neighbour before you threaten him; and let the law of the Most High take its course.

Give it to God, in other words; and cut people some slack. And always be ready to forgive, as we ourselves are forgiven, totally. That's how Matthew 18 ends.

It can be a radical way of being the church. The Mennonite church, which grew up in the Netherlands in Reformation times and is big now in the US, takes Matthew 18 really seriously. They are thought to be pacifists but that's only part of it. What they believe in is resolving disputes through confrontation, forgiveness and reconciliation – not violence. Speaking out is central to how they relate to one another and with the world.

It's tempting to say that it's not rocket science but, as always, it's the doing it. What kind of difference might this make to the way we are with one another? – in church, in our homes, at work, out and among people? It's what Jesus asks for. It's got to be worth a try.