

BIBLICAL REFLECTION *for Trinity 14 (13 September)* **Matthew 18:21-35**

"Living alongside each other in perfect harmony". Now, there is a thought. Nations, communities, people – we can all agree that getting on with each other is by far the better option in life than being at war, dispute, or fuelled by dislike and hatred. We know what happens when nations fall out and warfare is triggered; we know what happens when communities fall out and unrest is triggered; we know what happens when we fall out – with neighbour, friend or partner – and hatred is triggered. In an ideal world, most of us would prefer a more harmonious alternative.

To achieve such, when potential conflict arises, we have to experience reconciliation in one form or another – and within that process, an inevitable level of forgiveness. Saying "sorry" when an issue goes wrong is not sometimes the easiest thing to do; the anger inside, the feelings, the thoughts, the desire for revenge become all-too-clear, and create a barrier that both strengthens our resolve to continue the hatred, and another barrier that prevents us from being able to climb over and reach out in love. Forgiving is not an option at times, yet really ought to be if we want to restore equilibrium.

Whether we are falling out with the EU as a government, or whether we are in dispute with our neighbours, or whether we just simply cannot any longer stand our partner or our family, we have to realise that such thoughts will inevitably impact upon our faith. Some of the great hypocrites (and we have all known them, and sometimes even been them), some of them have been the most visibly devout people of faith, and yet are armed with the sharpest of knives and tongues. Unfortunately, our churches all-too-often cater for a few, and realising this, provide a timely reminder of how destructive they can be. As today's extract from Matthew so portrays, such behaviour is never far away.

So, how do we guard against such? How can we ensure harmony in life? Is it even possible to create such a utopian world? The reality is that what Matthew's example gives us is reminiscent of so much of human behaviour – the two-facedness, the impossibility, the sense of wrath – these are sentiments that are never far from the surface. What the challenge our faith lays before us is: how do we grow away from such feelings, and what is our aim as we do?

Desiring a sense of calm in life is not a bad place to start. Surely most people would like a 'quiet life', one that goes about its business with the minimum of hassle, and a large dollop of hope for what might be bright, cheerful and attractive. With luck, and a great deal of effort, such an approach should allow for a reasonably good life – and if everyone in our world adopted the same then we would be deliriously happy! But, it is just not going to happen, is it – and yet it could – and that is where our faith's power kicks in. It can happen, it can happen if we want it to happen, it can happen in our hearts – and when it does that, it can happen as best as is possible in life itself. Human pressures may well bombard it, but if we hold that strength of faith – if we hold the prevailing power of God at large – if we do that, then our best effort becomes our supreme effort, holding all potential for good possible.

Starting from this point is vital – all life in a sense starts from here – all faith does the same. Our ability to seek harmony, to ensure its success, and our desire to forgive and embrace – all of it stems from the character we have become within the eyes of God. True, a total atheist can be a loving, caring, wonderful person, for being "nice" is not the prerogative of a person of faith – but what our faith does is strengthen the resolve, reveal the reason, offer the hope, and ensure the power source. When we reconcile and forgive we are doing so because we want to reflect the image of Christ in the very person we are, and in reflecting such, we provide others with the peaceful alternative, the loving alternative, the just alternative.

Of course, as our extract from Matthew also reveals, there has indeed got to be a sense of justice mixed within the love and peace. We cannot just roll over and play the part of the weak and rather pathetic victim. We are entitled to see right prevail, however that may be achieved. Sometimes there does indeed have to be example of leadership and sound judgement as seen in Matthew today in order that the balance of right is restored. This may inevitably raise questions of 'turning the other cheek', but if in doing so, we simply get punched again, there is something else that must be done. It is never straightforward.

So, we spend our lives trying our best to rebalance those lives within our capabilities, and if we take anything from today's scripture it is in how pointless dispute can be. There appeared no winners as such in the extract: the king lost his money, his forgiving nature was abused, there was fear among the community, there was hatred, there was violence, and there was a vivid reckoning. If the graciousness of the initial act had followed Jesus' earlier comment to Peter, this story would have had a very different outcome. If we perhaps listen to God – and if others hear His words – who knows how different our world might be?

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