

The question today is – how should we live out our faith?

We start 600 years before Christ with Ezekiel the prophet. At a time of huge upheaval, 10,000 Jews being taken to exile in Babylon, Ezekiel's prophetic role was to speak God's Word to the people.

Ezekiel was the watchman and God had spelt out to Ezekiel the responsibility of his role, like this.

If the watchman fails to sound the alarm the death and destruction brought by the enemy is on the watchman's head.

If the watchman sounds the alarm but no-one pays any attention, then the death and destruction is not the watchman's responsibility, it's on the people who ignored him.

If the watchman sounds the alarm and the people take notice and defend themselves, it's the best possible outcome for all.

Ezekiel's responsibility was to speak out a warning from God himself whether they listen or not.

The message Ezekiel spoke was how willing God is to forgive and how much he longs for the wicked to turn from their evil ways to receive forgiveness and live. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked, he wants for them to turn away from their wickedness and find life.

In what way does this scripture from 600 years before Jesus help answer our question, how should we live out our faith?

We remember that the Old Testament was and is the bible for Jews. This scripture would be known by Jesus, Peter, James and John. This scripture shaped the faith as they knew it. The idea of

a responsibility in declaring God's Word and purpose becomes embedded in the church.

One of the things Matthew chooses to write in his Gospel, which is aimed at Jewish Christians, is how that responsibility looks in the church.

Which brings us to the Gospel reading from Matthew 18. And there are two versions of the passage.

The oral history of Jesus was first written down by Mark and then Matthew and Luke. Any copies of the Gospels were handwritten and there are some versions of Matthew's gospel that say,

If your brother or sister sins....go and point out their fault.

There are other versions that say,

*If your brother and sister sins **against you**...go and point out their fault.*

Let's assume it's the first one. This responsibility feels a little like Ezekiel the watchman. He had to give a warning and we must do something similar. It has to be taken seriously and there's a process.

It's clear the instruction is to the whole church but let's assume for the moment I'm the one dealing with it. I come to you one to one and bring out in the open that there's something amiss. And you take no notice.

So I try again and this time I bring Revd Terry and one of the wardens and you still take no notice.

I then feel I must follow scripture so I invite you to come to the PCC meeting (we have one next Tuesday evening by the way) and even there you take no notice.

And so I follow the final suggestion that you are to be treated like the pagans and tax collectors. You are in the outer darkness.

And that is how this scripture has been followed in fact I saw in my NIV study bible "This verse establishes one basis for ex-communication."

I really don't feel comfortable about that. I don't feel comfortable about ignoring Matthew chapter 7 which tells me not to judge. I suspect this scripture has been used far to frequently to serve purposes **other** than to save someone from the error of their ways. *If you don't agree with me and my ways of doing things, you are out of order and out of here.*

I'm not averse to speaking up when I come across something I think is harmful in our relationships and our relationship with God, but I suspect this scripture has been a licence for other purposes.

The other version "if someone sins against you" gives the whole passage a very different slant. Jesus taught us in his prayer, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. He told Peter we must forgive seventy times seven.

If the attempt to reconcile with someone who has sinned against you takes place motivated by forgiveness, then our actions have a very different basis. It's about being at peace with each other. Not harbouring old hurts and "sins" against each other. What is at stake is the reputation and conduct of the church, a people who deal with issues motivated by forgiveness.

It also changes our understanding of the sentence. *If they refuse to listen treat them as a pagans or tax collectors...what did Jesus*

do? He spent much of his time with pagan's and tax collectors telling them the kingdom of God was near and to repent.

In other words, if someone won't listen or doesn't pay any attention to what is being said to them, we assume they really haven't got hold of the faith and we go back to the beginning and start at square one.

How should we live out our faith?

I think this question leads us to consider motivation.

For Ezekiel the motivation was the direct and powerful calling God had given him to speak to the people about their wicked ways. Ezekiel was faithful to his calling.

Our motivation should begin in a place of humility, recognising that we are forgiven people and how costly our forgiveness has been. In his book *Amazed by Jesus*, Simon Ponsonby suggests a new and more meditative way of saying the creed making it personal, reflecting on the cost.

From The Apostles Creed

He suffered under Pontius Pilate (for me)
Was crucified (for me)
Died (for me)
Was buried (for me)

If we do feel we need to intervene and speak up, either because someone's behaviour is sinful or they have sinned against us directly, it should be in the hope that the outcome is that they recognise and turn from sin and experience forgiveness and life to the full.

We cannot ignore how people have acted towards us. There is a need to respond, and our response should be one of forgiveness, compassion and kindness. We are to respond as Christ responded and by such means we have our answer.

How are we to live out our faith. Christlike.

What shall we take away from this? In seeking to be Christlike we approach a matter such as this in humility, with compassion and kindness. We commit to not ignoring something that has hurt or upset us, but dealing with it and should we be in a situation to speak to someone else drifting astray we do so trusting the Holy Spirit gives us the words.

Perhaps the way in is from a compassionate point of view. Concern for the other person, not assuming we have some moral high ground.

What then will be the result? A church community committed to one another even when there are moments of awkwardness. A church community with no backlog of unfinished business and long held hurts. A church community living the faith that are able to agree together in prayer, where the presence of Jesus is felt more strongly as we gather together.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 10/9/23