

Father's Day

As a father: I love it when my kids treat each other well
If there's abuse in a family: if hurt goes unchecked
A family can't keep together: there can be no true unity
As a father I also love it when my kids forgive each other
Without forgiveness – if there is ongoing bitterness and anger
A family can't keep together: there can be no true unity
Now the image of family life; of brothers and sisters
Is at the heart of today's reading
And the need both to check sin, and to seek reconciliation
This is at the heart of today's reading
So, as disciples of Jesus, let's listen to his teaching

'If another member of the church sins against you,

OK, let's pause

A literal translation at this point would be, **'If you brother sins against you...'**

Or as we would say today, **'If your brother or sister...'**

Someone with whom you are related at a fundamental level

After all, you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your relatives.

The language of brother and sister

Is the Scriptural way of talking about those who live by faith

This is the sort of relationship we have with each other

God is pleased with us when we adopt this mindset

That these people are my brothers and sisters

This is the way that Jesus thinks

He who is not ashamed to call *us* brothers and sisters

So the translation 'member of the church' is good as far as it goes

But remember: the image is of dealing with sin in the family

One other thing: today's reading seems to be dealing with *sin among peers*.

Just before this text Jesus has been dealing with sins

Committed by those in authority against the little ones

Literally, against children, but by extension, all those lacking power

Jesus gives the warning about the millstone and the sea in this connection

And he then goes on to give his disciples hell-fire warnings

About dealing seriously with things that would make anyone

Stumble in the life of faith

He then goes on to give guardian angel teaching
And assures us that it **is not the will of the Father that one of these little ones should be lost.**

From there he goes on to give the parable of the lost sheep
And then we get to today's teaching
So, there's a trajectory
Moving from how those in authority treat the little ones
To how they treat each other
And in all this, the joy of heaven when one that is lost is found

Let's listen again: **'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.**

In the life of the church there will be times
When we feel hurt by how our fellow Christians have treated us
The hurt will have a particular quality, because we rightly expect better
It can be easy and natural for us to mediate on the hurt
To start to ascribe malevolent motivations to their behaviour
To take a form of revenge by talking with others
But Jesus calls us away from this path
He instead commands us to go to the person alone and correct them
Not text them, or facebook message them
But *go* to them: there is something unique in face to face meeting
We can read more easily what is going on
It is easier to clear up confusion and misunderstanding
By going to our fellow Christian, to our brother and sister
We get to the truth more easily:
Quite possibly that person didn't know they hurt us, or so badly
If they listen, there can be restoration
Jesus puts it this way:
If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.
It's like you have a new member of the family
But, of course, things may not work out so smoothly

One aside: love does not take offence easily
It seems to me the sort of sin that Jesus says we should deal with in this way
Is the sort that cannot and should not be easily overlooked
Perhaps especially sin that could lead to harm to little ones in the congregation
Also: we often learn by being corrected
Especially by those who love us and have good will toward us

And one more thing: elsewhere Jesus gives teaching about when we remember
That someone has something against us
And that we should go to them (Matthew 5: the Sermon on the mount)
**So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your
brother or sister* has something against you, leave your gift there before the
altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,* and then come and
offer your gift.**
So, either way, when we have been sinned against
Or when another person feels hurt by us
We should go to them, that's Jesus teaching

Jesus goes on: **But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with
you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three
witnesses.**

In conflict, Jesus is saying, it can be necessary to bring others in
Even, it seems to me, to get a clearer picture of reality.
When we are hurt, it's very easy for us to see things from our own perspective
And when another accuses us of hurting them
We can easily and naturally go into self-justifying mode
Sometimes we can't even repeat back accurately what they have said
Having others can broaden our picture of reality
And help us in understanding
Jesus commands us to go down this path if necessary.

St Paul has teaching that seems to reflect Jesus' commands so far:
**My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received
the Spirit should restore such a one *in a spirit of gentleness*. Take care that
you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way
you will fulfil the law of Christ.** Galatians 6
Again, notice here: the aim is restoration, not exclusion
Restoration achieved with a gentle and humble spirit

Of course, not even bringing others in will necessarily find the lost
Jesus gives us a third course of action:
**If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the
offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a
Gentile and a tax-collector.**
Then the congregation is involved, and the mind of Christ in the congregation
If the brother or sister refuses to listen

Then we are called to treat them as those outside the household of God
But, following the example of Jesus, not to give up on them

It's in this context, of aiming at winning a brother or sister back
With the understanding that it may be necessary to take drastic action
That Jesus gives us these words: **Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'**

Agreeing in Jesus' name; gathering in Jesus' name

This is in the context of dealing with sin in the church

If we want to get a Scriptural picture of what this looks like

In the life of the church, we have one, it seems to me, in 1 Corinthians 5

Listen to what St Paul writes:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant [puffed up]! Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you? For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgement *in the name of the Lord Jesus* on the man who has done such a thing. *When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 5

This is serious stuff, with serious consequences

But note that the aim is not condemnation, but salvation

It is to win back the brother, not to finally lose him

If sin goes unchecked in the church, it destroys true unity

If there is not forgiveness in the church, it destroys true unity

If there is not forgiveness

Can you guess how Matthew's Gospel goes on?

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant

The great parable about the necessity to forgive

A parable that we will be hearing next Sunday

In all this we will hear good news

If Jesus commands us to move out of our comfort zone in confronting

Those who have sinned against us

If he expects us to act to win back our brother or sister

If he expects this attitude from the whole Christian community

If he commands us to forgive; us, so weak and fearful

How much more can we be sure that he will act to win us back to the Father

And be unending in his willingness to forgive our sins

We are brothers and sisters; we are gathered together by our Father

So that we may not abuse each other, but honour each other

And live in the forgiveness that we have in Christ Jesus our Lord

May God grant us to be free

To encourage each other in what is good

To go to each other in a spirit of gentleness where there is sin

And to forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven us

May God grant this for Jesus sake'. Amen.