

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020**  
**Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Collect**

Almighty God,  
you search us and know us:  
may we rely on you in strength  
and rest on you in weakness,  
now and in all our days;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Romans 13:8-end**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Matthew 18:15-20**

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 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. 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. 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.'

## Sermon

When I was growing up, I wouldn't say that our household was particularly argumentative. But it is true to say that if there was an argument happening, it is likely that I would be involved. In various ways, I was able to argue with each member of my family, even my sister and dad, both of whom are quite conflict averse. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that when I went to university, at the end of the first term, I felt secretly quite pleased with myself for not having been involved in any arguments for a whole term. Only to discover that soon after returning home, conflict arose once more.

One of the things that I have discovered living alone for half of my life is that it's pretty hard to argue with yourself. And the focus of this morning's gospel reading is on the way we live together. How we relate to one another. And what we do when conflicts arise. Yet, as is the way with so much that Jesus said, it raises as many questions as it answers and challenges us to think deeply. While it has a deceptive simplicity, it surely cannot be regarded as a blueprint for conflict resolution. If there is one thing we learn about Jesus throughout the gospels, it is that he really wasn't one for providing a blueprint.

Perhaps one key to unlocking this morning's teaching is to set it within its context. When I was studying the New Testament, we were encouraged to think about the ways in which the different gospel writers told their stories. Matthew was very precise in the way that he told his story, seeking to convince his mainly Jewish audience that Jesus was the Messiah that they had been waiting for. One of the images that we were offered was of each of the stories in Matthew's gospel being like a bead on a necklace. The order in which he chose to tell the stories was significant in helping his hearers to understand. Just as the order in which we place the beads onto a string creates the pattern of the necklace.

And so here, Matthew places a story about how we deal with conflicts within a community in the middle of the eighteenth chapter of his gospel. But let's take a moment to notice what comes before and after this story.

Chapter 18 opens with the disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. It's one of those questions that makes us raise our eyes, isn't it? Why are the disciples so obsessed with greatness? Haven't they been listening at all? Surely they've heard enough of those phrases about the first being last and the last being first by now?

Yet perhaps we need to move beyond our collective sigh. Because really the disciples are just like you and I. They are human beings with the capacity to dream and aspire. This year's exam results season may have presented particular challenges, but it is fair to say that we encourage our young people to work hard and do their best in their studies. And so the disciples' desire to understand what greatness looks like in the Kingdom of Heaven makes sense.

And in response, Jesus sets before them a child. He highlights the child's humility, and explains that all who welcome the child, welcome Jesus himself. He warns, too, against placing stumbling blocks in the way of those children who believe in him, and goes on to offer that graphic image of ripping out our own eyes if they cause us to stumble.

So Matthew is keen, in this eighteenth chapter, to remind us that greatness does not look like we might think. He recognises, too, that each of us can be tempted to sin, and advises us to find ways to guard against those temptations.

Then, just before this morning's reading, we hear the story of the lost sheep. The one sheep who has gone astray. And the shepherd leaves the ninety nine to go in search of that one lost sheep. The story concludes with Jesus saying that the father's will is that not one of these little ones will be lost.

And it is in this context that we hear this morning's gospel reading, which speaks about how we should respond if a member of the community sins against us. The suggestion is that we speak to that person alone and that if we have no luck, we bring along a couple of witnesses. And finally they should be brought before the whole church.

I wonder why Jesus told this story, and why Matthew chooses to place it here. There are certainly some principles that make sense. First, if we have a grievance, it surely makes sense to approach the person with whom we have that grievance, to understand the situation from their perspective. This counsel also helps us to think hard about whether we are really being fair in our assessment. It can be so much easier to embellish a story that we share with our friends, rather than discussing what has really happened with the person themselves.

And yet the reason I caution against seeing this as a blueprint for conflict resolution is what has gone before in this chapter. Jesus has placed children at the heart of the Kingdom, and reminded us of the value of even the sheep who has gone astray. He seems to recognise the importance of those likely to be the least able to bring a grievance against someone. Indeed, if you have ever felt wronged by someone in a position of authority, you will understand just how hard it is to bring that grievance into the open.

So I wonder, why is the issue of conflict brought up here? And why are we urged to consider ways in which we handle conflict?

It strikes me that it is for the very reason I mentioned at the beginning. That, while I am able to live a life free from conflict if I live completely alone, as soon as we live in community, disagreements are inevitable. And what matters is less the fact that we come into conflict, and more the way we handle that conflict.

What Jesus says encourages us to consider key principles. That the needs of the most vulnerable must never be ignored where there is conflict. That we need to listen carefully to one another and seek to understand different perspectives. That it is God's most fervent hope that none should be lost. And, as we will explore in next week's reading, the importance of forgiveness.

St. Paul recognised the same thing. His life's work involved setting up Christian communities and then realising just how hard that could be because people will be people. And his answer? Love. Love your neighbour. Do no wrong. And keep on loving.

It sounds so easy, and each one of us knows that it really isn't. And yet it is when we are together; when we seek to live alongside one another, bearing with one another, learning from one another, that we truly know that God is right there with us.

Amen