

Sermon – 10th September 2023

I wonder how you would describe your relationship with conflict. Are you someone who avoids it at any cost? Do you walk away from any sign of disagreement? Perhaps you are someone who stays calm when there is conflict around. Perhaps that helps – and perhaps it doesn't. It may be that you can identify different responses, depending on the kind of conflict and the people involved.

When I was younger I thought of myself as comfortable with conflict. I think probably what I meant was that I didn't mind having a good row with someone if it cleared the air. The thing is, as I have gone through life, I've discovered that a row rarely does clear the air. My sister would be the first to say that the moment a row starts, she will disappear – which isn't very satisfactory if you want to clear the air. With my dad I can just see the anguish that rowing causes – which takes away any sense of resolution. And my brother somehow manages to have such a strongly divergent opinion that there just isn't any sense of a meeting of minds. Basically life has taught me that the extent to which I am comfortable with conflict is only part of the question, because where there is disagreement, there is always more than one person involved.

This morning's reading presents a very specific way of dealing with a conflict arising within a church community. As I read it, I wonder why it is that Jesus felt the need to speak in such a specific way. To give such detailed instructions. It's so unlike the majority of his teaching – those parables which need to be interpreted and reinterpreted; that we can enter into and interrogate. It's probably worth noting here that this passage appears only in Matthew's gospel – I wonder why that is.

Before we look at what Jesus has to say here, it is also worth setting these five short verses in context. You may remember that last week we heard Peter trying to tell Jesus that he would not need to undergo suffering, which led to a stern rebuke from Jesus, followed by the call to disciples to be prepared to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow. That, though, was in chapter 16. For some reason, we have skipped over a chapter and a half to find ourselves hearing Jesus giving this advice about conflict.

So, in case you haven't memorised the entire gospel, I'll briefly fill in the gap. At the beginning of chapter 17, Jesus is transfigured – that occasion when he goes up a mountain with Peter, James and John; Moses and Elijah appear; and Jesus's face begins to shine as God once more identifies him as God's son, the beloved, with whom he is well pleased.

This is followed by healings; further predictions of his death; and teaching both about the temple tax, and the importance of valuing little children – both in becoming in some ways like them, and in ensuring that they are not blocked from entering God's presence. Finally, just before this morning's reading, is the parable of the lost sheep.

Why is this context important? It can be so easy to try to understand sections of the scriptures in isolation. This can be particularly appealing when they say what we want them to say. There is something about the context, though, that provides us with a picture that is so much more complicated. And if you're anything like me, the experience of real life is complicated.

This advice about dealing with conflicts has to be set alongside the story of the lost sheep and what Jesus has to say about forgiveness, which is what comes next. It also has to be set alongside the real challenges of being disciples of Jesus when we are human beings.

Think for a moment about the challenges that we face as parents and indeed any adults involved in the life of children. Our overwhelming desire is that they grow up to be themselves in all their glorious uniqueness. And yet we also recognise that we bear a responsibility. We are, after all, the adults, and part of growing up is learning. We can only do that if others help us, guide us and show us.

As a teacher, so many different aspects went into the way that I tried to help young people to grow and develop. There was a framework of expected behaviour that was provided by the school – and we all know that the more consistently this is enforced, the more effective it will be. Nevertheless, that didn't mean that it wasn't worth helping children to understand the reasons behind the rules. I remember having a conversation with my Tutor Group, who were keen to tell me that one of their other teachers couldn't control them. We gently explored whether the job of a teacher is to control the pupils or to teach them. And who is responsible for the way we behave.

Parents and teachers have a wealth of information available about how we learn best. Often this is about focusing on the positive, rather than the negative. And yet in some things there is a black and white. Sometimes we do need to be told what's right and wrong.

Often, as I read the scriptures, I find myself realising the complexity of seeking to help us all to grow in relationship with God and with one another. I can see within the scriptures different ways of trying to guide, show and explain. Different ways of connecting with so many different types of people. I find it particularly powerful that this morning's gospel reading is set alongside the particular passage of St. Paul's letter to the Romans that we have also heard. That first section bears repeating:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... 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.”

It's so true, isn't it? That if we could all live our lives loving one another, we would truly be living in God's kingdom. It sounds so simple. And yet somehow it just isn't. For so many reasons, we all struggle to live out the love to which we are called. And when we see other people failing to live it out, it can be very galling indeed.

Which is why we have such overarching statements as the commandment to love God and neighbour, set alongside particular teaching, sometimes in story, and sometimes giving more direct examples. The kind of dispute resolution envisaged in this morning's gospel reading may or may not work. Probably it depends on the willingness of the different parties to engage, and the levels of trust between the individuals. What we do know, is that when Jesus says that those who refuse to listen are to be treated as tax collectors and sinners, he is not suggesting that they be shunned. After all, he spent a significant amount of his time with tax collectors and sinners.

And perhaps in the end, when it comes to conflict, that is the most helpful realisation of all. That the key to everything is relationship. That doesn't mean there are any easy answers. But given the inevitable differences between us, it is only by listening and being heard that any kind of greater understanding will emerge. That, and time spent growing in our own relationship with God.

Amen