

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 13th Sunday after Trinity – 6th September 2020

Reflection

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Our Gospel reading today, which appears only in Matthew's account, offers what might look like a blueprint for how to resolve conflicts in the church. It starts with a private conversation between two people, moves on to a small meeting to try and resolve the position and ends up with one person being estranged from the community. Well, that's clear, then. Tidy. Ordered. Straightforward. Like a legal process in its clarity. Except that this is our Lord talking, so we need to think more deeply about what is being said.

The passage reminds us that there has never been a time when there weren't disputes in the church. Conflict in the church – like conflict in the home or the workplace - is always painful. When we fall out with those with whom we worship, those with whom we potentially share profound experiences of the presence of God, it quite simply hurts.

Although Matthew's description of how to resolve a conflict is told from the point of view of the person in the right, we should remind ourselves that there is always another side to the story. Let's look at it from the point of view of the person being

challenged. Perhaps they genuinely don't understand what others think they have done wrong and are convinced they are innocent. Might they not feel ganged up on when their complainant comes back with a group of friends in the church to support them? What if they could just as easily get their own group of friends to support them? You could quickly end up with a divided community.

Or what if it turned out differently at the second stage? What if the group of friends brought along to try and make the errant one see reason, ended up deciding that the errant one was actually right all along, or that things weren't so clear-cut and there was right and wrong on both sides? What if you, the complainant, were asked to change your thinking, so that now you were made to feel like an outsider when you thought this was about to happen to the other person?

Confused? Yes. Life is messy, there is always more than one side to a dispute, and not everything is clear-cut. Perhaps the clue to this story actually lies in the sanction described by Matthew: 'If the offender refuses to listen even to the church [heaven forbid], let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector'. We are reminded that tax-collectors were despised because the taxes they were collecting were for the Roman Empire, the hated occupier in first century Palestine. Yet they were often the ones Jesus was found spending time with. He did not exclude them from the group who followed him in his ministry, the group who went on to found the church. On the contrary, they were welcomed in. We don't need to look far for an example: Matthew himself was understood to have been a tax collector. Zacchaeus was another. The religious authorities often challenged Jesus for associating with them. If he were a prophet, surely he would know not to give them the time of day?

In our Gospel passage, therefore, the sanction for the one in dispute with the church is not as simple as it sounds. For this Gospel speaks of a radical new way of living that is not ordered or tidy. Those whom we might think Matthew is almost encouraging us to ostracise are the very ones our Lord brought into the centre. When someone ends up outside the church following a dispute, our Lord is saying to us: show them the love and care that I did.

The problem with the Christian faith is that we are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. Including – perhaps especially – those we find it difficult to live with, to work or to worship with. Those whom we feel uncomfortable with, who press our buttons and make us say things we wish we hadn't. Some who themselves have been hurt and carry that hurt into their conversations with others, often without realising.

Confused? Yes, and we should be. For there is nothing tidy or ordered about Christian community. Yet we are called to love, in it and through it, even it takes us to the foot of the Cross, which is where we will always find God. Arms outstretched in costly reconciliation, with a love that (when we are able to face it honestly and clearly) makes us fall to our knees in shame, repentance and gratitude.

We cannot always be united. Sometimes it is right that we should hold out for what we believe to be the truth. But to counterbalance our tendency to argue, we are also given the vision of what our unity might achieve. 'If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven'. Oh dear. Is that really all he Jesus we are capable of? Just two of us agreeing? It's not a very high bar, is it? Yet sometimes in the church it feels that even two people agreeing

about anything would be a small miracle. The same is true of workplaces, volunteer organisations and anywhere else that humans gather to attempt a joint endeavour.

Yet we are called to love, in spite of our differences, our certainties, our clarity that we are right and the other is wrong. We are called to go back to the drawing board and start again, painstakingly building relationship where there has been fracture, confidence where there has been mistrust, hope where there has been disappointment. Earlier in this Gospel, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges us: '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.' (Matthew 5.23-24) What wise and beautiful advice.

What we learn, time and again, from Jesus's life and ministry is that it is in loving that we will unlock the potential for good we carry inside us, and that when we do so we will find our Lord beside us, as he promised: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name...' It may not be easy, but when he was asked what mattered most, Jesus replied that there are only two commandments that matter. Let us do our best with the second, whatever it costs us.

And if we do manage to settle a dispute, in case we are tempted to think we have solved everything, we might also remember the words that follow immediately after this Gospel text, when Peter asks: '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.' (Matthew 18.21-22)

Amen.