

**Matthew 18: 15-20, Accountability  
CCO and StJN, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2014.**

Father, may we hear your words to us and may they help us to live as your children. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, we read about the pivotal point in Jesus' ministry when finally Peter acknowledged out loud that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Then last week, we heard how, after this spectacular moment of divine revelation, Peter got things wrong, trying to persuade Jesus to avoid the trouble he would meet by going to Jerusalem. John's sermon spoke about what it means to take up one's cross and follow Jesus, and about the way we are called to travel together on our journey of faith, not as isolated individuals, but as part of the greater body, the Church.

What we see in today's reading is Jesus preparing his disciples for life after he has left this earth, for life as the Christian church. Of course, the church didn't exist when Jesus was speaking, but Matthew is recalling sayings of Jesus and clearly applying them to the life of the church that has now come into being, and for whom he is writing his gospel. Our readings from Romans these last few weeks have also been showing how the Christian community is to live. The teaching is as relevant to us today as it was to those first disciples so many years ago.

Just the other week, on the Radio 4 Sunday programme, there was a feature on domestic violence, reporting that cases of domestic abuse occur within church congregations, and mostly go unnoticed and unreported; if help is sought, it is usually from agencies outside the church. I found that very sad, and quite an indictment of the churches. One would hope that here, of all places, people might find refuge and help in such circumstances. We all know that we can fail, that we sin, that we let each other down. But if our faith, our

church, has nothing to offer in such situations, then something is surely very wrong, and we have strayed very far from what our Lord Jesus envisaged for us.

In our reading, Jesus gives a clear model of what we should do when someone within the Christian fellowship wrongs us, when we are sinned against by our brother or sister in the church.

I'd like you just to take a few moments to think of a time when you have been wronged by someone, not necessarily someone within the church – it could be someone in your family, a colleague, anyone; I'm not going to ask you to tell us about it, because it may well be that you still feel deep pain from it, which is why this teaching is so important. But I'd like you to recall whether or not the issue was resolved; if so, how did that resolution come about; if not, what has been the consequence for you? [pause].

I wonder if you were able to follow the model for reconciliation that Jesus gives us: first, go and speak in private to the person who has wronged you; if they will not listen, go again, taking with you another member or two of the fellowship; if the one who has wronged you still will not listen, bring the matter before the church itself, that is, your congregation. And if the person still will not listen, then treat them as a pagan or a tax-collector, someone separated from the heart of the fellowship group, although still to be cared for.

I wonder if you have ever experienced the process of restoration that Jesus talks about taking place within the church? I think I've only come across it once. I think that generally it's something we are not very good at. And that is probably because we have not experienced it or seen it work ourselves. We tend to learn these things best by example, but this way of dealing with problems is simply *not* part of our everyday practice.

As Christian disciples, we recognise that we are largely the product of the society and the culture in which we have grown up and in which we live. In many ways, our culture is far removed from the way of life followed by Jesus and his first disciples.

This teaching of Jesus is very counter-cultural for us: it goes against nearly all the examples of dealing with wrongs that we witness in our daily lives. I'm not a great watcher of soap-operas or reality TV, but I see enough to have noticed that the characters in them do not normally use *this* approach when they have been wronged. We are far more likely to see them having a shouting match, muttering darkly behind the other person's back, often trying to get others onto 'their' side, or else taking outright revenge. That is not Jesus' way.

So why does it matter so much that we Christians should try to do things Jesus' way, rather than follow the way of the world? Well, for one thing, it is a very clear and obvious way of showing that being a Christian can make a big difference in society. But I think it is chiefly important because it goes to the heart of what it means to be the Church, the Body of Christ. If the parts of a body are at war with each other, the body will be sick and useless. As Christians, we are called to come together, to work together, to live in peace with one another, so that we can focus our energies on looking *outwards* to the needs of the world around us, rather than spend our time, our energies and our efforts sorting out our own squabbles. Oh dear! I think we have to confess that as a whole, the church has not done very well here.

I was trying to think of an example to use, which would not be too personal, and I remembered hearing about a group of people from a Yorkshire church who went on a visit to a cathedral in another diocese. Several of the people in the group were Forward in Faith members, which means that they reject the ordination of women

into the priesthood. The group enjoyed a conducted tour of the cathedral and then gathered for a midday Eucharist, or Holy Communion. They saw a lady prepare the table, and she then led the worship. Just as she invited the congregation to come and receive communion, a row of the visitors stood up and walked out – they would not receive bread consecrated by a woman priest . . .

I found that quite shocking. If I had been that priest, I would have been furious. If they felt that strongly, they could just have left before the service started – they'd seen the preparations being made by the woman priest, they could have guessed she would be officiating. But to get up and walk out at the high point of the service was pretty appalling in my view: not only did they show no regard for the others in the congregation, but they delivered a huge insult to the woman priest herself, a real slap in the face. I felt she had been wronged by her brothers and sisters in the Christian fellowship.

Let me make it clear at this point that I am *not* saying that this is how all Forward in Faith people behave; I am *not* condemning those who do not see things my way. The issue is not with what they *thought*, but with what this particular group of people *did*.

I don't know if there was any resolution in this case, but it set me thinking: how might it have been resolved? This is a tricky one, because the wronging resulted from a profound difference of opinion, and I don't think any amount of discussion would have brought the two sides together over the issue of women priests. And we have to acknowledge and accept, I believe, that there will always be differences of opinion within the church – certainly within the Church of England, which tends not to lay down the law quite as much as some denominations; we are fairly inclusive: I only have to look at the congregation in Christ Church to see that:

we have people from a whole range of backgrounds, from Roman Catholic, to Baptist, to Brethren, to Free Evangelical, and they can all find a home with us, which is wonderful.

But our differences of opinion should not lead us into doing wrong to another. In the case of the lady at the cathedral, how good it would have been if she had been able to take one of the offending visitors aside and quietly explain how their walk-out had made her feel; the visitor might then have explained why they had done it, and apologised, thus gaining a brother or sister, as the gospel puts it. There would have been a restoration of relationship: almost certainly not a coming together of minds and opinions, but the re-establishing of right relationship, peace between them, the ability to work together as partners in Christ for the furthering of the Kingdom; without that healing of the wrong, the body as a whole is fractured and weakened.

So it is essential, our absolute duty, *not* to ignore it if someone within the church wrongs us: we should not be left wounded and without help; and if the other person is in the wrong, we owe it to them to give them the chance to acknowledge they've been wrong, to repent and to be forgiven. And if we invite a third party to discuss the matter between us, we may even come to realise that we ourselves have also been in the wrong, and need to apologise or change the way we do things. It takes courage, but I think we must learn to do it; it takes trust, but within the church we must be accountable to one another, if we are to witness to the life of the risen Christ among us. We can pray privately about things: we can pray that we might be able to forgive; we can pray for our own forgiveness. But that private, individualistic approach is not enough: we are called to live as one Body, we are called to be Church, not just enjoy our own hotline to God. If all that mattered was our own personal relationship with God, why would this teaching have been so clearly given in the gospel?

For too many centuries and in too many places we have witnessed the fracturing of the Body of Christ: since the Reformation, it is estimated that there are 2,700 different denominations within the church; and we can see how the Body of Christ, the Church, has become weakened, and often despised because of its internal struggles. No-one can change that but we ourselves, the Christians of today. Let us pray that we may learn to follow the pattern Jesus calls us to, and leave some good, wholesome examples that others may follow, and that will build us up into the strong, healthy Body God wants us to be. Amen.