

## 23rd Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Gospel is about the need to correct one another. We find the same teaching in the First Reading from Ezekiel. The Second Reading from Paul alerts us to the truth that all we do, including correcting of others, is to be done in love. If we do not love another person, we certainly do not know them. They are aware of this and they cannot trust our judgment concerning their behaviour. Any correction we offer will not work. We had better leave it to someone who loves and so knows them. It obviously matters how we behave. If we hurt others we are certainly hurting ourselves. One would hope that there was someone in our lives who cared enough about us to point out the error of our ways. If we don't care that someone is behaving badly, we must not love that person very much. Jesus is also telling us how we should go about this correction when it concerns people who are part of the Christian community with us.

Correcting others is necessarily a delicate task and so Matthew has prepared us for what Jesus has to say here. Matthew chapter 18 verses 1-5 records Jesus' call for humility. If we correct someone from an assumed position of superiority, it is surely not going to work, for we will be putting the other person down and the ones who are being corrected will experience the need to protect themselves from our put down. If we lack humility, if we think that we are better than the other person, once again it is better for us to leave the correction to someone else. Our pride cannot but distort our judgment.

After speaking of the need for humility, Jesus goes on to warn against giving scandal (Matthew 18:6-9). However, sometimes people are scandalised even though what is happening is in fact very good. The Pharisees were scandalised when Jesus ate with sinners and when he healed on the Sabbath. This was because of their narrow-minded view of God and their refusal to look at what was really happening. We cannot please everyone. However, if people of good will, the people Jesus describes as 'the little ones who believe in me', are scandalised by the way in which we correct others, we can be sure that there is something wrong with our way of going about things. If good people are scandalised by the way in which those in authority treat people; if good people are scandalised by laws that refuse communion to the broken and struggling, then we need to look again at our systems of exclusion.

Finally, having warned us not to look down on any person, Jesus speaks about the shepherd who goes off searching for the one stray sheep and reminds us: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost'(Matthew 18:14).

It is in this setting and against this background that Matthew gives us Jesus' words concerning how we should correct one another.

The passage immediately following today's Gospel is about forgiveness. This too provides the proper context in which to understand today's lesson. If forgiveness is appropriate, then, if we are going to correct people we must be ready to forgive them when they apologise and change their behaviour.

So, having looked at the context, let us examine the Gospel. Jesus' suggestion is that if a problem arises between two members of the Christian family, they should try to sort it out between themselves, with all humility and respect and readiness to forgive. Normally this would resolve the matter. However, sometimes things are too confused to be resolved in this way. Jesus' suggests that we then seek the help of two or three others. In this he is following the standard Jewish legal practice that required the evidence of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). If that doesn't work the matter should be taken to the community. It may be of interest to note that this is one of only two passages in the Gospels when Jesus speaks of the community of his disciples as a 'church'. The other time is when Jesus spoke of building his church on the rock of Peter (Matthew 16:18). Matthew does not mention any specific community leaders in this passage. Perhaps the Antioch church had not yet developed a set pattern of organisational leadership. Jesus speaks simply of taking the matter to the community of those whom he calls elsewhere his 'brothers and sisters'(12:50). We are to be brothers and sisters to each other.

If the person who is being corrected refuses to take any notice of the community, he or she is to be treated as a 'Gentile or a tax collector'(Matthew 18:17). There are two possible ways of understanding this. Gentiles and tax collectors were not members of the Jewish synagogue. Therefore, the synagogue officials could exercise no jurisdiction in their regard. So when Matthew has Jesus speak of treating an unrepentant member 'as a Gentile and a tax collector', he may simply be telling the members of the community that their obligation ceases and that they must leave the unrepentant person to God. Hopefully, the good shepherd (18:12-13) will find other ways to bring the unrepentant sinner back.

However, Matthew may also have in mind a declaration that the sinner has broken communion with the church. Paul speaks of the need for such a declaration on a number of occasions in his letters (2Thessalonians 3:15; Titus 1:13 and 2Corinthians 2:5-11). If a person is behaving in a way that is seriously harming the community, and is unrepentant, the community must be able to protect itself. However, as Paul stresses, such action must always be in view of bringing about a change in the excommunicated person. It must be done with deep sadness and everything possible must be done to help mend the rupture so that, as soon as the one causing the disturbance shows signs of changing his or her behaviour, he or she is welcomed back with open arms and great joy.

Addressing himself to the community of his disciples, Jesus repeats what he has already

said to Peter: 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'(see 16:19). In this context, it refers to the power to pronounce whether or not things have been set right.

Jesus has already said that 'the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'(9:6), and he has already told his disciples to pray to God their Father: 'Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors'(6:12). He has said, too: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy'(5:7). When the church prays for God's forgiveness of a sinner 'it will be granted by my Father in heaven'(18:19).

The key to this is the presence of Jesus among his disciples. The psalmist tells us that 'the Lord is in his holy temple'(Psalm 11:4). Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon (died 135AD) says: 'When two are seated and discuss the Torah, the Shekinah resides among them'(The Sentences of the Fathers, III.3). Similarly, Jesus says: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. One recalls the child whom Jesus placed 'among them'(18:2). Gathered around Jesus, his disciples experience the glory of Jesus' humble prayer, and, in the words of Paul: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another'(2Corinthians 3:18).

Please God, within the community there will be people who know and love us and who are willing to point out when we are falling short of living the life of a disciple. They want to see us in close companionship with Jesus. Please God we, too, will have the courage and the concern to go out after the straying sheep and point out the way back to the community and to Jesus. May we all do this humbly and with love and ever eager to forgive and to welcome each other to reconciliation.