

Sunday Homily

13TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

6 SEPTEMBER 2020

YEAR A

“For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.”

Matthew 18:20

Introduction

Imagine you lend a treasured possession to a friend, perhaps a special book or a recording of some music that’s no longer available. Whatever it is, it gets damaged and when your friend returns it to you, or tells you that it’s broken beyond repair, she/he doesn’t seem to realise how special that particular item was to you. She/he seems quite casual in her/his apology; but you’re a Christian, so through gritted teeth and with a forced smile you say, “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

But it does matter and you feel resentful whenever you think of it. That resentment simmers away until one day your friend asks if she/he can borrow something else and suddenly you flare up and make it clear to her/him in no uncertain terms that you won’t lend her/him anything of value again after last time. Your friend, taken aback by this reaction, goes away to nurse her/his own new grievance against you.

Relationships can be damaged by such incidents and by others much more extreme. As Christians, we need to be realistic about this: loving others as ourselves doesn’t mean pretending we never hurt or upset each other, that we never argue or that we always live peacefully together.

Our Gospel reading shows us a more loving way to deal with rifts in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Gospel Teaching

Matthew writes about the guidance Jesus gives for managing arguments and conflict within the Church.

The first step, says Jesus, is to try and sort the problem out with the other person directly, without involving anyone else at all. If that works, then the relationship begins to heal and there are no ripples from the dispute to reach and hurt others.

If this first step doesn’t help, then Jesus suggests that we try again but with one or two other people present who can confirm what is said by both parties.

It's only when the rift remains that the whole Church needs to be involved, and if even that has no effect then, as a last resort, the offending person is to be excluded from the Church and treated as a "Gentile and a tax collector" – a despised outsider.

However, although Gentiles and tax collectors were generally despised and excluded, Jesus thought of them as sinners, or lost sheep, who needed to be found, forgiven and healed with love and compassion. If we are to follow his example we need to remember that we are still to love those with whom we no longer have fellowship.

Jesus promises that whenever any of his followers meet together in his name, even if it's only two of them, he will be there with them. Remembering that Jesus is alongside us when we try to resolve difficulties in our relationships will be a powerful reminder that we are to love one another and to seek peace and reconciliation wherever there is conflict between us.

Application

Many of us would prefer to avoid conflict or confrontation with others. Perhaps also many of us feel guilty about being angry with someone we think we ought to love. Perhaps we feel we should "forgive and forget" a hurt or a wrong done to us.

The problem is that if self-righteousness and anger are stored up they can fester and become very destructive of our own peace of mind and our relationships with others.

The way that Jesus describes is the way towards reconciliation with other people and peace of mind within our own souls. It is the way that is healing and life-giving, and it is the way that God relates to each of us, wanting us to live rather than dying because of our refusal to accept his forgiving grace.

The way that Jesus describes is costly. It requires honesty and humility, the willingness to admit to our own failings and faults and to reach out in love to someone who has hurt us.

The way that Jesus describes can be lonely when we approach someone to seek reconciliation only to be met with a refusal to talk. That is the way of the cross, and it is perhaps when we feel most alone, rejected and hurt that Jesus is closest to us as he keeps his promise to be with us always.

When we meet in the name of Jesus to seek peace between ourselves, his Spirit moves among us to bring about the peace that the world cannot give.