

The task of reconciliation

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Sermon given on 6th September 2020 at St Michael's church Sandhurst. The readings were Matthew 18:15 to 20, Romans 13:8 to 14 and psalm 145: 1 to 8

This morning I'm going to talk about our reading from Matthew's gospel. A passage about reconciliation and prayer; our reading starts with. "If another member of the church sins against you."

A better translation of the word member is brother, and for brother please also hear the word sister for we all equal before God.

Jesus doesn't want us to consider fellow members of the church in the same way that people consider members of a golf club or tennis club, but as brothers with that unique family bond, which is deeper than any other relationship could possibly be.

So, in the first verse Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault, but do it privately, just between yourselves."

The underlining objective should be for just and lasting reconciliation; remembering that reconciliation without justice isn't reconciliation and is only building up more problems for the future.

Also, as St Paul said in Galatians chapter 6 verses 1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

I think St Paul is reminding us, when he says, "Watch yourselves or you also may be tempted," that when you speak to the person who has sinned against you, that we too have our faults as well, and taking the moral high ground or a superior stance will not help in reconciliation.

And of course, when we offend our neighbour then I'm sure that when we've seen or been shown our error, we are quick to apologies in order to remain on good terms with our fellow Christians and other people.

Now from my experience, and I'm sure yours as well, it is better to pray about the situation before going to speak to anybody about a problem, rather than going to them in our own strength.

But if he will not listen to you, do not lose your temper and tell him what you think of him, rather go and speak to one or two other senior members of the church, and if they agree, take them along with you, and speak to him again.

When Jesus said take one or two people with you, Jesus is referring to Deuteronomy 19 verse 15 where it says.

“A single witness may not give evidence against anyone in the matter of any crime or sin which he may have committed: a charge must be established on the evidence of two or three witnesses”.

Of course, today I am not speaking about any crime or criminal offence where, for example, the health or welfare of a child or children are concerned, in the situation of any criminal offence the police must be informed first and then the church.

We now come to the reference to Tax collectors and Gentiles, where Jesus says, “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and as a tax collector.”

I think Jesus is saying do not give up on him because these are the very people we need to help, and although he may not listen we are to continue to pray for him that he will one day come round and be able to be reconciled to the church family.

Then follows another difficult set of words; “Truly I tell you whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, and when Jesus says, “Truly I tell you.” Jesus means pay special attention to what I’m saying.

Jesus first used those words when speaking to St Peter, when he said, “Whatever you bind on earth would be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

However, when Jesus was talking to the disciples about binding and loosing, he was making the point that they, the disciples together, the leaders of the Christian movement, were to make the decisions, not people from outside the leadership.

In any large organization there must be rules and regulations otherwise there would be chaos.

We now come to a real teaser which as Jesus said needs special attention, Verse 19 starts, “Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

On the face of it, that saying is clearly not true, we do not get what we want every time we pray for it, and that is my experience and I'm sure that's yours as well, so what did Jesus mean, or what sort of prayers was Jesus referring to, when he said those words.

Firstly, prayer is not a personal shopping list of, "I want." Prayer which is basically selfish will not be answered, because selfishness deprives other people, and God will never be a part of that; nor is it an opportunity to get your own way at other people's expense, if we pray to win then someone must be disappointed and lose, and God will not be a party to that either.

Also when a small child, for example, asks for things from its parents, eventually the child begins to understand what sort of things they can ask for and receive, and what it is pointless to ask for because it will never happen, and the same thing applies to us and to God.

We need to remember that God is the God for all the people on earth, and when our prayers are for the good of other people then we are in tune with God, but when he sees greed, selfishness or the lack of consideration for other people then we are apposed to God and he is unlikely to help us.

So, we now come to the sort of prayers that Jesus said God would always answer, and I'm starting with two examples of prayers prayed by St Paul.

The first one is from St Paul's letter to the Philippians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10, where Paul prayed for the Philippians this prayer; "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless."

The second is from St Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10 where Paul prays for the Colossians; "For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live lives that are worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him, as you grow in the knowledge of God."

Those were two examples of corporate prayers, which we can also adapt for ourselves, but like Jesus who often prayed alone, we too can also pray on our own either for ourselves or for other people.

And a simple continuous prayer, which we could all pray, and which is in line with St Paul's prayers might be, "Lord Jesus Christ Son of the living God please help me to be the person you want me to be." I've now adopted that prayer for myself.

The word continuous in the last paragraph is important, Jesus said as recorded in Luke chapter 11 verse 8, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."

God will always help those who love him, who want to get to know him better, and who try to bring other people to Christ.

As human beings we have been given the unique privilege of being able to talk to God, and all our prayers are graciously listened to by God, who above all wants us to continue to talk to him, and to listen to him.

And the last part of the sentence reads, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

At the time of Jesus, the Jews had a saying, "where two sit and are occupied with the study of the law, the glory of God is among them."

And we often use the words, "The Lord is here, his Spirit is with us." Which we use here at St Michael's and which can be used in small house groups or within families at home, because when families pray at home the Lord is there his Spirit is with them.

And of course, Jesus would be with any of us if we were praying about reconciliation and forgiveness, because reconciliation and forgiveness is the very nature of God.