

Sunday 6th September 2020

Sermon by Rev. Peter Lyth

A Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving

God of the vastness of all that is,
of all peoples and communities,
here we are, part of this place;
gathering to worship and adore you,
marvelling at your love and care and your persistence with us.
You are beyond our imagining.
Again and again, we are engulfed in your vastness and love.
How can we do anything but praise you, again and again?
Amen.

A Prayer of Confession

In the higgledy-piggledy ways of life, Lord, with challenges and changes pulling us this way and that, we sometimes find it hard, in the heat of the moment, to know what is right and what is wrong.
Forgive us for our failings and wrongdoings.
Forgive our insensitivities to the ways of others.
Forgive anything that cuts us off from each other or from you.
Amen.

Read Matthew Chapter 18: 15-20

Sermon

In the newspapers today have been reports of a dispute involving Adele, the well known pop singer/songwriter. She has been criticised on twitter for Cultural Appropriation – celebrating the virtual version of the Notting Hill Carnival from her home in Beverley Hills by wearing a Jamaican Flag bikini and her hair in Bantu knots. There have been many critics, saying that she should not use that hairstyle in particular, that it is the exclusive preserve of people of Afro-Caribbean heritage. Others have defended the decision. This is the latest in a long line of disputes that have erupted in that medium. President Donald Trump is prolific in its use, often with contributions that can be described as incendiary. Different groups have taken offence as the politics between Gay and Transgender, Female/Feminist and Transgender have exposed conflicting aims. One of the things that is clear from all of this is, with Twitter being of limited content, the opportunity for nuanced and reasoned discussion and listening is lost. The result is heated exchanges and disputes that are difficult or impossible to resolve.

The passage for this Sunday, taken from Matthew's Gospel, addresses the issue of disputes within the church and can be contentious. Now we do need to be careful with this passage as there is a danger of using it as a "complaints procedure" – as if it were written by the Human Resources department of a company or organisation, with the ultimate sanction of excommunication instead of sacking. It is of its time, but there are truths that can inform how we view similar circumstances today. However its context is vital.

The first thing to note is that it uses the word Church. As those of you that heard my sermon last week will be aware, in most translations, there are only two uses of the word "Church" in the whole of the Gospels, both by Matthew, the first one was mentioned last week the second is this one. The understanding of what is meant by the word in that context is very different to now. The Greek word that is used is *ekklesia* which means gathering. The community that Matthew was writing to and for was a small one. It was living in a hostile environment and took its corporate life seriously, as it had to in order to survive. The second thing is its context within the Gospel. It is sandwiched between teaching that addresses attitudes. Before, we are told that, in response to the question from the disciples, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven", a child is placed in their midst and they are told that the greatest is one who is humble like a child. Following the passage, Peter is told that God's forgiveness (and by implication ours too) cannot be limited. So self-righteousness and rigid condemnation have no part to play in this.

So the whole point of what is going on is about pardon and the restoration of relationship. The phrase that is often used is, "sins against you". This can be understood as doing something that severs the relationship, breaches a bond of trust or causes injury. In many respects it is similar to our relationship with God – sin is the fracturing of the relationship between the Divine and the human. The first thing that we are told is that the injured party is obliged to approach the other in order to reopen dialogue. Allowing the situation to continue is not an option. The two are to meet together and the hurt discussed. We are not told what the "proper" outcome of this is, because there isn't one. What is important is the process of listening on both sides. In our recovery from the lockdown caused by Covid-19, fault-lines have been exposed. On the one hand, there are people who are desperate to return to normality sometimes at all cost and there are others for whom this prospect is viewed with terror. In wider society, we are told by the Prime Minister to "return to work" (despite a recent study that has shown that those working from home work on average an extra 48 min a day) but there are many that are fearful – those who are sufferers of chronic illnesses and those who are disturbed by the thought of the return to sardine like conditions on commuter trains. On both sides, listening needs to take place. In my experience, most of the disputes that occur in the church that fail to be resolved are due to the lack of dialogue.

The second thing is the answer to the question, "What happens if this doesn't work?" What if the approach to resolve the issue is rebuffed? Then we are reminded that it has wider

implications. Situations like this have to be taken seriously and ignoring them or hoping that they will evaporate does not work. Involving more of the church is not to be taken as a licence to bully one party into submission, rather it is an acknowledgement that the whole community has a stake in brokenness and reconciliation. It's more than the confession and pardon that happens in our prayers each week, it is the real relationships that are in need of repair. The church is seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to the fracture. Matthew addressed this earlier as he quoted Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, ““Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift”. There is a final escalation – but there it's ambiguous “Let them be as a Gentile or a tax-collector” – what does that mean, given that Jesus saw his mission to be amongst them – maybe it's a moment when we realise that human intervention is futile and we draw on Christ?

Finally, to go back to the beginning, it's about listening. As I said before the first step is that encounter of the two people involved – we are not told what to say, and how to react – only to make that step and to try and move towards restoration. Jesus said, “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” – the agreement of the two – perhaps those who were previously at odds unleash something powerful – Jesus' presence – truly something to work for.

Prayers of Intercession

Eternal, ever-living God, we pray for those who this day need our prayers:
those we see around us...
those we have left at home...
family and friends near and far...
strangers and communities we will never meet or know,
but whose peril we hear of and see on our screens...
those whose life is ebbing away consumed by old age, frailty, illness or neglect...
those who grieve deeply for lives and loves lost...
those who cause grief and chaos in society
and who live seemingly with different values from ours,
for them and their victims and their families...
those who are forgotten, unnoticed, unloved, unmissed...
Lord God, in your abundance of mercy,
hear these and all our prayers.

Amen

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