

23rd Sunday Year A

Matthew 18.15-20

Fr Peter Groves

In these last few months, we have all had to learn lots and lots of new rules. Actions that were unthinkable at the beginning of the year are now commonplace – how many of us initially recoiled from the idea of wearing a mask in public, and now consider it completely natural? If you have spent any time in central Oxford since lockdown, you will have seen attempts at a one way system in place for pedestrians. In the wide thoroughfares of Broad St or the Cornmarket, there isn't too much pressure to comply, but in smaller towns and on narrower walkways such rules are quite important if we are to keep our physical distance. We have just returned from Southwold, in Suffolk, where there is a one way system on the main street through a very small town with a very large number of visitors. It's easy not to notice it at first, and hence to be caught out, but once one is used to it, the very English

indignation one feels towards those who are getting it wrong, not playing by the rules, is a surprisingly powerful feeling.

Seeing others get it wrong, and knowing that we ourselves have got it right, is not always the best experience we can have. We don't need encouragements for our self-righteousness. This is especially true if we feel that we have been personally wronged by another, a situation which is tackled in this morning's gospel.

St Matthew, a wonderful narrative theologian, was also clearly someone with a practical mind. The eighteenth chapter of his gospel consists in a large body of teaching about how the church – the Christian community – ought to behave, what its characteristics ought to be, what it ought to look like. It is significant that at the beginning of the chapter we find the well known teaching that to enter the kingdom of heaven one must become as a little child. But it is also significant that within this magisterial passage we

encounter the practical day to day problems of the fledgling Christian community. The passage just read is a discussion of what action to take if we are wronged by one of our brethren.

It is a gospel passage full of common sense. The first thing to do when wronged is not to dwell on your righteous indignation, or shout to the whole world about the fact that you are a victim, but to go and speak to your brother. How often do we think we have been wronged only to discover that we misread the situation, misinterpreted a word or an action, misunderstood what it was that someone else intended? The person walking on the wrong side of the street may only just have arrived in the town, or maybe unable for good reason to cross the road. Or if someone has annoyed me – at work, in the family, whatever – I can choose to focus on that person's wrongdoing and dwell on my status as a victim, or I can be literally considerate, I can consider the generous possibility that my indignation is misplaced, and choose to speak to them about it.

But perhaps speaking to the wrongdoer does not work. Perhaps we have not misunderstood, perhaps there is a genuine intent to do something towards us that we do not like. Perhaps we have been deliberately wronged. What then to do? Again, the answer is practical. Again, don't shout it from the rooftops, and again don't let it eat you up inside. Take advice. Go and talk to two or three others and see what they think. If their dispassionate judgement agrees with yours, then you have a genuine case. But more likely than not, those others will see the situation differently, will be able to open your eyes to aspects of the case that you have not noticed or considered. If they agree with you then together you can confront the wrongdoer. It is not practical to do this alone, you are unlikely to handle the situation well, and if you want to take your grievance further then you need some witnesses anyway. In this case, the evidence of two or three witnesses is useful in proving to others that you are not simply being petty or paranoid. Something bad has happened, and something needs to be put right.

The drastic action proposed in the worst case scenario is not an individual action. It involves the church. Here is the second and last time we will find the word church used in the gospels – the first came when Jesus announced his intention to build the Christian community upon the rock who is Simon Peter. In today’s passage the church has both a pastoral and a quasi-legal function – it can conclude, on the basis of evidence, that something is wrong and it can, if necessary, choose to shun the person who has behaved poorly. This is, of course, far more serious than it sounds. Matthew is holding the threat of exclusion from the community of Christ, from those who live in the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven, over those who allow personal disputes to go unresolved. This drastic discipline can, however, never be considered a success. The first suggested action – that you take up your problem with the other person one to one – offers the happy result that if your brother listens to you, you have “gained” him. Kerdaino, I gain or win, is a very interesting verb to choose. It’s a verb of victory, and

it's used not in the context of triumphing over your opponent, but in the context of being reconciled with him. The genuine victory is the harmony of the community. The relationship of love between one person and another is the basis of community life, and that is why a dispute between one and another is never a matter of just those two, but a problem for everybody in that same community.

And this is really the nub of the issue. My so called grievance is not actually mine. It belongs to the community, and to this particular community – the Christian church. It is a community characterised not by the individuals who make it up, but by the presence of Christ. Where two or three of you agree on anything they ask, it will be done. Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them. The basis for the action of reconciliation is nothing other than the presence of Christ, the presence of love personified, because the wrong which I think belongs to me, is in fact a wound on the body of Christ himself, a wound which I inflicted just as much as anyone else.

So next time we feel ourselves wronged, next time we detect the slow germination within us of a martyred sense of grievance, we ought to remember that right and wrong belong to God. Not only that, but very little which we think belongs to us – be it a spilled drink or our righteous indignation – is actually of any significance. What does belong to us all is the obligation to love our brothers and sisters. And it is love which is the fulfilling of the law.