

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 06 September 2020, the 13th Sunday after Trinity

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;
through him who was lifted up on the cross,
and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-11; Matthew 18:15-20

This week's reflection is by Reader Pete Gillions:

To sin is human, to forgive is divine.

Someone once said that "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." The virus outbreak with its restrictions on meeting people has certainly shown that enforced solitude can be a real struggle. We are at heart social beings with a longing for relationship. But however much we struggle with isolation it is when people do get together that we find all sorts of other problems. I am not just talking about people who differ from us. Even in places such as Church, where we share the same creed and belief in a God of grace – even here people fall out with each other. There is nothing surprising in that; it is something we all experience.

And it is something Matthew obviously experienced as well. When Matthew was writing his gospel the early Church under strain. The Church had been formed from within the Jewish community and was now embracing people from different nations – the people referred to as the gentiles. And Matthew clearly believed that Jesus was indeed Israel's longed for Messiah, who was now drawing together Jews and Gentiles into one community. So, whatever their background this meant all believers were brothers and sisters in this one new community of faith. But there were struggles and strains – external pressure from the orthodox Jewish community who saw them as heretical but also strains from within the community due to fall outs.

And there is no doubt Matthew had this in mind when he recalled the words of Jesus spoken years earlier. Running through all the gospel accounts are examples Jesus sharing wisdom relating to everyday life. The gospels speak loudly about the holistic nature of faith, that it should permeate all aspects of our lives. Jesus says for example, that how we spend 'our' money gives a better insight into what we truly believe than the words we say. And that how we relate to others is a reflection of our actual relationship with God.

It is clear from what we see both on the world stage between different countries and also from personal experience that life is littered with examples of relationship breakdown. Jesus suggests a simple approach to take when that happens to us. Instead of talking to others, talk to the person in the hope of restoring the relationship. A simple approach sure enough, but also strikingly idealistic. The tendency to nurture hurt and share grievance with others is strong. And the translation 'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault' is a bit unfortunate. Pointing out their faults is probably not the best approach. Another translation captures the thought better 'If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend'. A much better tone but still not an easy thing to do and it does sound a little bit like the sort of advice you find in self-improvement books. Just try a bit harder and you can become a better person.

But that is not what Jesus is asking of us – to try harder. Instead through His words and deeds He shows time and again a different way to see things. Jesus shows us that our relationship with God is not based on a trying hard approach to win merit. It is instead based on God's mercy, a mercy we can receive from a loving Father. Like the prodigal son we can discover the riches of grace and know the enfolding embrace of love. And it is from that restored relationship with God we can, despite our own weaknesses, find the grace to reach out to others. Which is why in the Communion service the peace of God is proclaimed we are then asked to share it with each other. The best sign of our faith is when embrace and forgiveness of God simply overflows.

May God in His mercy reveal to us more of his love and help us to share it in a broken world.

Amen.

