

St Stephen with St Julian

Together in Prayer

13th Sunday after Trinity - 6th September 2020

This week's Together in Prayer is written by Becky Leach



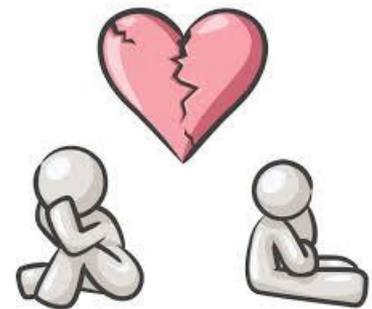
Reflection – based on Matthew 18: 15-20

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt 18: 20).

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 feels quite casual in his/her 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 him/her 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.



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 wrong done to us.

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

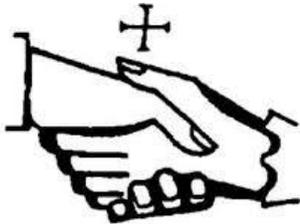
Our Gospel reading shows us a more loving way to deal with rifts in our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Matthew writes about the guidance Jesus gives for managing arguments and conflict within the church. The first step, he says, is to try to 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. But if this step doesn't help, then Jesus suggests that we try again but with one or two people present who can confirm what is said by both parties and support and encourage a way forward. Hopefully this will bring about a resolution and reconciliation.

It's only when the rift remains unresolved, even widening, that the whole church (community) needs to be involved, Jesus says. And then, only as a last resort, if nothing else has brought about reconciliation, should the offending person be excluded from the church and treated as a "Gentile and a tax collector" – a despised outsider. This last instruction sounds dreadful to our 21st century western ears today I suspect. But perhaps that is to misunderstand what Jesus is really saying. He longs for reconciliation and love between all people, and especially so within his Body on earth – the church community. Yet he knows we are all sinners and if reconciliation and forgiveness just aren't possible then a withdrawing and separation may be the best way forward to prevent hostilities growing, factions and cliques rising and bad relationships spreading beyond the two that have experienced this first hand. Sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. And remember: when Jesus says treat them as Gentiles and tax collectors let's focus on how he himself

treated such groups of people. He thought of them 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.

And 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 where there is conflict between us.



RECONCILIATION

The way that Jesus describes is the way towards reconciliation with other people and peace of mind within our 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 a 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's the way of the cross, and it is perhaps when we feel most alone, rejected and hurt that Jesus is closest to us and 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 which the world cannot give.



Questions to ponder

- Reflect upon relationships in your own life that aren't all they could and should be; where repentance and forgiveness are needed and reconciliation should be sought.
- Turn that into prayer – just listening for the promise that Jesus is with you, and seeking his guidance, wisdom and courage.
- What action may be necessary now?

Prayers

Unchanging God, change us from the heart until the whole Church awakens to your love that reaches out, nurtures and celebrates, neither holding back from what is difficult, nor rushing where angels fear to tread.

We pray for love, sensitivity and courage within our church communities as we seek to love one another in your name. Amen.

Merciful Father, break all habits of destructive behaviour in our homes and families, our friendships, our church community, and in all the homes of this parish. Develop our ability to celebrate what is good and face what is not with honesty and courage to change when needed. Amen.

Healing God, lay your hands on all who suffer, so that they may know the support of your presence and find wholeness and peace in your love.

We pray especially for any who feel they are beyond your forgiveness. May they quickly discover the freedom of your acceptance. Amen.