

## **Disunity, Open Hearts and Reconciliation!**

A sermon preached by Revd Sarah Flashman on the 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Trinity 6 Sept 2020

Ref: *Matthew 18 v 15 -20*

My students at Wycliffe have discovered that their Chaplain and Fellowship Group Tutor is full of surprises. This doesn't just relate to my doing ballet each week and even being 'en pointe'! I have also in the past year made a confession which seemed to visibly shake them; I watch '*Neighbours*'! Shocking! For those of you who know not what I'm talking about, *Neighbours* is an Australian TV soap opera on daily for 20 minutes. It is excellent social comment and gives me a superb view of culture...that's my excuse anyway! Soap operas are definitely an acquired taste and not for the faint hearted and yet, I have experienced church as soap opera from time to time. Soap operas invariably carry a regular storyline around fallings out and conflict of one sort or another and church life is certainly not immune from the same!

Today's gospel reading at first glance resembles a series of three vignettes. However, an understanding of the Jewish culture of the day and Rabbinic teaching enables us to grasp that the opening verse (describing a member of the church family who sins against you) takes us on a cohesive and connected journey which flows through these five verses, giving us a startlingly helpful approach and spiritual insight.

The issue of CONFLICT leads us to observe how Jesus offers us three ways of moving forward in such circumstances; conflict, disagreement and pain will happen in any community.

Firstly he addresses PROCESS. Here Jesus offers a constructive and honest way forward. Face to face meeting; no emails in those days! If one to one doesn't enable reconciliation, take along help in the form of witnesses. This approach relies upon the truth that we share Christ as a common foundation. Christ is a firm foundation upon which to stand.

Secondly, he challenges ATTITUDE and the example is Christ himself. "*May your attitude be that of Christ*" writes Paul to the new church in Philippi. (Philippians ch 2). The person you are addressing is a brother or sister in Christ, not the 'other' or even the 'enemy'. Go with grace and having submitted yourself to God in prayer.

Thirdly, he focuses us upon OUTCOME. Will the individual we seek to be reconciled with listen or not? How they react is not in our power, but, if we've approached them face to face (the right process) and with the right attitude and humble prayer then what follows is a binding or loosing accordingly and this next step is overseen by leadership which embraces and understands a healthy authority.

At this point Matthew seems to talk about something perhaps unrelated. BINDING & LOOSING! What is being referred to here, as Theologian and NT commentator Michael Green expounds, is a rabbinic phrase familiar to those first Christians "*Which school are you,*" he asks, "*Shammai or Hillel?*" This at heart is about community relations. Strict and particular about morality and ceremony (the school of Shammai bound) or flexible and sympathetic (the school of Hillel loosed)? Will you legislate through discipline or excommunicate? Jesus shows how the Christians inherit these same powers. It is about AUTHORITY. Leadership embraces authority but founded upon Jesus Christ being Lord and Saviour and therefore not misused and abused.

Finally, PRAYER. Unity is underpinned and experienced through prayer. The context for the resolution of conflict, and the authority that binds and looses, is immersed in prayer. Prayer forms

the backdrop and the breaking in of God's purposes. When Christians gather to pray in unity or purpose then God's presence is revealed.

What a practical outworking! What a hopeful pattern for us! It is one that is shot through with spiritual depth, reality and understanding. May the Lord grant us grace in these days as we continue faithfully in this time of vacancy; working collaboratively together, sometimes rubbing each other up the wrong way and sometimes getting it wrong. Here is a reminder of a workable way through enabled by the Holy Spirit. Good news indeed! Amen.