

A Reflection from Revd Ali Massey for Trinity 13

Do you ever shout at the radio or television? Do you ever let rip when the politicians or the pundits say something outrageous or downright daft? It's confession time - I'm afraid I do that. Sometimes, when I am in the car, I can be having such a heated conversation with the radio, that I occasionally worry what other motorists may think. However, it can be quite cathartic. It can get help to get everything off our chest without offending anyone. And of course, the added bonus is that there is no possibility of anyone answering back. But isn't a very mature way to behave when you don't agree with someone in real life.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus outlines for us, how we should approach conflict within our church community. Conflict should be dealt with in love and respect. An argument that I am sure none of us would debate. But it is the context of this teaching that I'd like to think about for a moment.

Over the last 2 weeks, we have had Matthew outlining the turning point in Jesus' earthly ministry. In Chapter 16 of his Gospel, Matthew describes Peter's divinely inspired revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. Then we had Jesus telling his disciples that he would have to suffer and die before rising again to fulfil his divine mission. Jesus at that point, turning his face toward Jerusalem and the cross.

Then in chapter 17, Jesus' divinity is confirmed by the transfiguration. The disciples, who have been on an incredible three-year journey with Jesus, now know who he *really* is.

But perhaps they haven't taken on board all that he has told them about his future and theirs. At the beginning of chapter 18 the disciples are squabbling about who will be the greatest in heaven. So, Jesus teaches them about humility and about the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God. In verses 4 and 5 Jesus says "Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." This radical and unconventional teaching is so new and different to their tradition and perceived wisdom. After all, children had no rights, they were considered their father's possession, and sometimes been considered less important than the family's livestock.

It is into this context that Jesus introduces this teaching about how to handle disagreements. Jesus knows how counter-cultural, how extraordinary, how earth-changing, how radical his message is. His message of love flies in the face of centuries of tradition and practice. Jesus' message of love and forgiveness contradicts their understanding of judgement and justice. Jesus' followers are not to condemn and judge, they are to listen and to understand difference. They are to forgive and not to demand an eye for an eye. They are to love unconditionally even when the object of that love is deemed by society, unlovable.

This message is so very radical, that Jesus explains how this new system of love and respect can work in a practical sense. Jesus is teaching his disciples, and us, baby steps of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Jesus understood what it was like to be human. He understood anger, discontent, disagreements, injustice, pain and grief. He had also witnessed first-hand the result of anger, retribution and revenge. He and his family had been refugees because of a king's anger and fear. His cousin was executed because of his condemnation of a ruler's lifestyle. Jesus' own life was threatened because of the fear and outrage of the religious authorities. Those people who should have been closest to God tried to trap him into blasphemy, the punishment for which was death. It is into this

understanding of human nature and man-made law that he speaks his truth of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Unlike much of Jesus' teaching, when he used parables and stories, this is Jesus instructing his disciples in a new way of being. This new way of being, is love in practice.

Jesus understands that, when he is no longer with his disciples then in their humanity, they may revert to their old habits and traditions. The new message of the Gospel is so radical that there will be disputes on matters of doctrine and practice. He understood how human beings work, how we can try to manipulate others to get our own way. How religiosity can get in the way of the message. So, he explains that Christians will have to learn how to argue well.

Jesus tells us that we should always seek to reconcile not condemn. Our natural reaction when someone breaks the rules or hurts us is to retaliate or punish. Jesus, when he responds to the disciple's question about who is the greatest, turns that argument on its head by asking who is missing and how can they be restored? Instead of personal greatness they should be working for those who are unable to advocate for themselves, the powerless and the dispossessed. The first principle of arguing well is to always seek reconciliation and community for all.

Any arguments, he says, should start in private and not in public. Unfortunately, with the prevalence of social media this guidance is so very often forgotten. Jesus understood just how destructive arguing in public can be. So, he tells the disciples that they should try to reconcile any argument privately. Remembering always, that when two or three are gathered together then God is always with them. If that doesn't work then Jesus tells them to stay in community for the sake of the community. Gather a small group together to try and reconcile the situation. Always looking for reconciliation in love. The two or three witnesses to the dispute aren't there to gang up on the perceived offender but to ensure that the matter is dealt with in love and truth. If unfortunately, even that doesn't work, then the matter is taken to the wider church community remembering, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians (4:15), that 'speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.' Always truth in love. We must always do everything in our power to help someone see that their behaviour is hurting themselves or others. But if they are unable to recognise that behaviour and change, then sometimes you have to remove yourself from that person. Or in incredibly painful, and fortunately rare, situations, remove the person from the church. Then Jesus tells us to treat that person as we would a 'gentile or a tax collector'. But how does Jesus treat the gentile and the tax collector? He loves them. He reaches out to them, he seeks reconciliation and ultimately he died for them.

Jesus reminds us that we represent Jesus in the world. Jesus asking his disciples, and us, to be the ones who always work for peace and reconciliation, who seek the lost, who advocate for the voiceless, who seek justice for the powerless.

¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Amen