

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

'See how these Christians love one another'

'See how these Christians love one another.' That's a reported observation that outsiders made of Christianity in the 2nd century. Looking in on this new religious movement people saw a radically different quality of life from the rest of their society. Though, let's not idealise the early Church. From the very beginning Christians have, at times, struggled to get on with one another. If it weren't so, we wouldn't have a number of the New Testament letters – like the passage from Romans that we read this morning. Paul had to write about love and relationships because Christians were struggling with the issue, just as we do today.

Love is the hallmark of Christian community. It's the heart of our way of life. But what do we mean by love? Love is a word that's been captured by the moviemakers and advertisers and become identified with how we *feel* about someone or something. That's not what the New Testament means by love. That God loves us hardly means that God gets a warm fuzzy feeling thinking about us. We know God loves us not because of the way God feels about us, but because of what God has done for us: God *gave* the Son for us. What the New Testament means by love, centres not on emotions, but actions. This isn't sentimental, romantic stuff. This love grinds its teeth, trusting that appropriate emotions will follow in good time.

Such love is modelled on what God has done for us in Christ – in particular, what was done for us on the cross. It's a love that's committed to achieving ends like forgiveness and reconciliation. It's all about working for the good of the other person. When we set out to love someone who has hurt us or offended us, we aren't being asked to change how we feel about them. Rather, it's about intentionally doing them good, regardless of how we feel about them.

This love, Paul says, 'does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.' A paraphrase (*The Message*) of that line puts it like this: 'You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love.' When we love like this, we're starting to reflect God's character – and then, people who don't know God's love, will see how we live and perhaps say, 'Ah-ha. What's this? Why are people behaving in this different, but rather attractive way?'

Of course, as we know only too well, Church life is damaged, even torn asunder, by a lack of love – by a lack of forgiveness and reconciliation. In every faith community there are unresolved hurts and resentments, some small, others large. Sometimes these issues are openly expressed, but more often than not, they manifest in more covert ways – in glances, avoidances, unspoken words (or spoken asides), simmering feelings – all of which ultimately distort how we live and minister together as a community. It robs the Church of that quality of life that ought to set us apart from our surrounding culture. The question isn't, do such issues exist, but how do we choose to deal with them? And what we model may be a very important gift to a society that's being deeply damaged by blatant nastiness.

The Gospel passage leads us to look at how we operate as a faith community, and how we might face such tensions.

We believe that Christ is reconciling the whole world, and each of us in it, to God and to one another. So, when Christians take their conflict as an opportunity to practice reconciliation, what they do in the Church can stand as a visible sign for others of what we believe Christ is doing in the world – an outward and visible sign of what we believe is happening in a greater and more mysterious way in the world.

Forgiveness isn't about papering over the cracks and pretending that nothing happened. And reconciliation isn't a matter of patting each other on the back and saying, 'It's fine.' If someone else – another Christian in particular – has been offensive, abusive, bullying, dishonest, aggressive, immoral – nothing can be achieved until this is faced up to. The wrong must be faced and owned (as the Royal Commission into abuse that's occurred in faith-based institutions has demonstrated).

Matthew presents Jesus outlining some practical steps around how we might deal with such conflict. He suggests that we should first talk about the issue with the person concerned, and if at all possible, privately. That gives both parties the space to reconsider and reflect. Let's not talk about it to others in the car park, or post comments on social media, or grumble about it over morning tea. We first talk it through face to face. The whole point is reconciliation, and when this can take place, it's a great joy, and I've found that it often strengthens the relationship.

If that doesn't work, then it's suggested we involve a wise person or two to help mediate. The reference to 'two or three witnesses' isn't to be used as a way of brow beating the other person, but rather to help both parties work through the process of reconciliation. The wisdom of another person may even help us to see our faults in the situation. Experience has taught me that I might just be wrong, and I may have something to learn here. But what if that fails?

Matthew's directs that we 'tell it to the Church.' This isn't about humiliating an individual, nor is it licence for gossip. If the Church is a community of love and prayer where relationships between members are taken seriously, then the prayerful and loving support of the community to resolve the matter might well be appropriate. In Matthew's community Christians probably met in small house groups where they shared lives and did much praying together. Often we need the prayerful and caring support of others who desire only the best for us, to help us work through tensions and conflicts.

The passage ends with the statement: 'if the offender refuses to listen even to the Church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.' I don't think this means, 'kick them out' (which is how it's sometimes interpreted). Jesus made friends with so-called undesirables. He loved them and gave everything to win them over. Rather, this is a challenge for us to work even harder at our relationships.

Love can be very tough work at times, and we so often don't get it right, but it's what we're about. This is brought home to me at every Eucharist when we're invited to share a sign of peace. This isn't an opportunity to talk about how the cricket went last night. It's a time when we affirm that we're sisters and brothers in Christ. We may not agree on some things. We may have fallen out over something. Yet, we share a sign of peace that says, we come to this altar-table together, bound by the love of God – seeking to live in loving relationship.

When we're next faced with someone who's really difficult and challenging, let's see if we can stay in touch with them and remain focused on God's love, and don't just paper over the cracks. And in the process of working at that relationship and learning to love the other, we might get a sense of how God loves us. What's more, it's a work that takes us to the heart of who God is. God is love, and when we give the energy and time to love one another, especially when the going is tough, we're reflecting, in a small but significant way, God's life and character.

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