

SERMON AT APPLECROSS: 5/9/93: OS/23 : GEOFF CHADWICK

Mtt 18:15-20: "APPROACHING THE ONE WHO HAS SINNED AGAINST YOU"

Today's Gospel reading, regarding what to do with another church member who sins against you, is sandwiched between two sets of instructions about forgiveness. The context of this passage is as follows:

Before the passage we find the parable of the lost sheep which ends with the words:

So it is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should be lost (Mtt 18:13, NRSV).

After the passage we find the instruction given to Peter that:

[you should forgive] not seven times but I tell you seventy seven times (Mtt 18: 22, NRSV).

Church discipline, or at least the reconciliation of differences between members is set within the context of forgiveness.

It seems to me that in Mtt's fledgling church, discipline and the reconciliation of differences between members had become an issue. One can almost hear the question being asked "What do you do with a fellow member who sins against you?" The answer is clearly given:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it too the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Mtt 18:15-17, NRSV).

Now we may find the final part of this statement quite hard, but it does contain some very good advice. It tells us, that when someone has sinned against you, go and sort it out with

them first before you take it to someone else. Go to the individual before you go to the collective body.

How unfortunate it is however, that we get this wrong! I know of too many instances where people who have felt sinned against, have, instead of going to the person concerned, gone and gossiped to someone else. Worse still I know of too many examples where people have ignored the person concerned and "gone straight to the top". Going "straight to the top" is a dangerous practice because it breeds mistrust, breeds misunderstanding, and promotes power games. Let me give you an example:

When I was teaching I had one or two parents who went the Principal to complain that "Their child did not understand any of that Maths I was teaching them." In one school I had a good Principal who would then encourage the parents to speak with me directly. Invariably we would find out that the child had not submitted any of his/her homework, and hadn't taken the opportunity to ask questions etc... Under these circumstances resolving things with the parents was relatively easy.

In another school, I had a Principal who chose not to put the parents and teachers in direct company unless it really was serious. In this instance I would get statements from the principal such as "Mrs X came to see me today and is worried that her child doesn't understand the Maths you teaching. Can't you make you lessons more relevant for that child?"

Well, I'm sure you can see the different affect that these two approaches had. The first approach was great. The second approach was devastating. My side of the story was ignored, I felt that the Principal did not have trust in me (he wouldn't let me speak to the parents easily), and power games were fostered.

Just from this small example, I think you can see that "going straight to the top", or gossiping to someone else are the most unhelpful ways of dealing with a grievance you have with someone else... Yet we all do it ... and why?

Because it's the easiest thing to do. "Going to the top" ensures action - but action done by someone else. By gossiping to others we often find a colluding ear, when what we really

need is someone to challenge our position. Furthermore, by going elsewhere we won't have to face the other person and we won't have to forgive them. We won't have to engage with the other "heart to heart", we won't have to hear their pain, and we won't have to tell them our own pain. That is why we avoid going directly to the other person.

In my pastoral work I occasionally encounter people who come to me with a complaint they have against someone else. In some instances they have come to me as a representative of the church with a complaint against another church member. Well, I will tell you now how I deal with these situations.

Firstly, I ask the question "Have you spoken to the other person about this?" (Most often they haven't) so then I need to advise them to go and do so.

People may then ask advice on how to do this, and I'm happy to give it, but it is unfortunate that people seem so willing to involve a third person in the dispute before they've tried to deal with it themselves first.

So if you come to me with some complaint against someone else, be prepared for me to send you away that you may deal with it yourself first. If that doesn't work then come to see me.

In my pastoral work, I have adopted a motto for myself (which just happens to be the motto of the Anglican church): "The Truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32).

I have met so many people who have got their lives so tangled up simply because they've failed to acknowledge the whole truth of a situation. It seems to happen very often in families particularly where "Family Protection Rackets" prevail. By this I mean families where "white lies" are used (sometimes with the best of intentions) to protect others from the harmful truth. The fact of the matter is however, that the protection is usually more harmful than the truth itself. Let me give you an example:

Story of pet dog given away by parents because it was too difficult to keep, but they tell their children that the dog ran away.

Here the truth was kept from the children because it was thought that it would be too difficult for them; the white lie seemed easier. But this is my point, the truth may not have been easy (ie the dog was too difficult to keep at home), but it is far better in the long run.

What is wrong with the white lie given to these children - after all it was "nicer" than the real truth?"

Well it lead to the following:

a) Guilt. The children felt that they didn't care for the dog enough. That's why it ran away.

b) Promotion of False Hope. "If the dog ran away, maybe it would come home sometimes. Let's keep waiting..."

c) Unnecessary Anxiety. "If the dog doesn't come home is it dead? Did someone steal it? Has it gone to a cruel owner?"

d) Cover up. What trust will the children have in their parents if they inadvertently find their dog again?

All of these issues could have been avoided if the parents were simply honest, and if the children could have met the new owners and handed the dog over even amidst much sorrow and tears.

So in your families, and in the church don't hide the truth for the sake of niceness. The truth may hurt, the truth may not be easy, but it is always better in the long run. "Family Protection Rackets" are no good to anyone - it is the truth that sets you free.

We are challenged in today's Gospel reading to take our grievances to the one who has sinned us. Avoiding the person by "going to the top" or gossiping to someone else does not allow the truth to be aired and it does not resolve the problem. We are advised to approach our fellow first, in the knowledge that it is the "truth that will set us free". We are also advised by the context of our reading that all this must take place in the context of forgiveness.

So it is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should be lost (Mtt 18:13, NRSV).

And...

[you should forgive] not seven times but I tell you seventy seven times
(Mtt 18: 22, NRSV).

So let us all be truthful with one another and speak directly to any that may have wronged us, for after all "It is the truth that will set us free".

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.