

Matthew 18: 15-20, Romans 13:8-14 – a sermon for 6 September 2020 by Rev Lin Vawer

I am being very honest now when I say that when I read the readings for today, and considered the options I seriously thought about locking myself in the shed and throwing out the keys until September 6th had passed!

Why? Because in both of these passages we are forced to look at the things that I think that Christians find hardest to talk about

Sin and dealing with sin, forgiveness, reconciliation and the command to love our neighbour

I hope you will understand why the shed seemed an attractive option!

Matthew wrote originally for a small community, living in a hostile environment that took corporate life very seriously. In this kingdom of Herod, Jesus had established little cell groups in places he had preached, healed, taught and passed through. They were loyal to him and the rules they were to live by were forgiveness and reconciliation. With love of neighbour and of self-binding it all together.

If we read this text in isolation, it reads like a legal document on how to deal with someone's sin and the cut and dried process it advocates makes uncomfortable reading. The fact that Jesus needed to give these guidelines at all may give us a little bit of comfort – you don't need to give advice where it is not needed. It seems that there has never been a perfect, harmonious Christian community, which does not need help on how to handle disputes.

In the verses that come before the reading, the disciples ask who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Jesus takes a child to him to illustrate his answer

“Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”

They are told to be conscious of the way they live as disciples and not to put stumbling blocks in the way for those who believe. As children of God they have a responsibility to live kingdom lives. It is no different for us.

Then, following the reading comes the word to Peter that forgiveness cannot be measured. God does not keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs and neither should we. Forgiveness is not our right to withhold, if we do so it begs the question as to whether we really understand God's forgiveness for us, that costly reconciliation that opened the way to the world of following Jesus – the world turned upside down and that back to front life that Phil reminded us of last week.

Sandwiched between these, is today's reading that is coloured by the tricky subjects of forgiveness and reconciliation. We are forced to confront the reality of life as Jesus shaped people. Like me I am sure you have heard the words “I will never forgive” or “that was unforgivable,” sadly words I have heard spoken by Christians as well as those who have no belief. We live in a world where sin is often compounded by unforgiveness and reconciliation seen as weakness. As Christians we are called to the opposite, to forgive, to reconcile and to love, including those who hurt us. Hard as it may be at times.

Forgiveness and reconciliation. Two hard things to practice for the followers of Jesus, then and now, they are the things we shy away from. Reconciliation is always hard won, it has to be worked at and it does not just happen by sweeping things under the carpet or pretending that something hasn't happened but equally, confrontation that does not aim at reconciliation is pointless.

God freely forgives and as a forgiven people, this community of forgiven sinners, we acknowledge that fact when we forgive others. Every time we say the Lord's prayer, we ask to be forgiven and to forgive. When we feel that we are the injured party we are to actively look for the person and initiate reconciliation. We have no right to nurse our grudges, whine about our wounds and resist

efforts to heal. We are to take the first step that can lead to a restored relationship. How tricky is that! The first step is always the hardest. And I think the bravest.

While Phil reminded us that we do not have to be doormats or accept bad behaviour, I would add here, that we are not being given a licence for attack on everyone who hurts or slights us, or a mandate to start a destructive gossip campaign. It is so easy when someone hurts us to do the opposite of what Jesus commands – we turn away in resentment, look for revenge, and try to find a likeminded ally. It is so easy then to cause division where there should be harmony.

While we are given a model to follow, there is no script to read but the last 3 verses underscore the critical importance of reconciliation in the Christian community.

“If two or three of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” and then Jesus adds, “oh and incidentally, I’ll be there too”.

Could there just be a tiny bit a sarcasm there “if even two of you can agree”? I think there’s a challenge for us there! However, sincere requests unleash a powerful force: Jesus promises his presence. We stand to lose so much when we fail to reconcile our disagreements.

All of this talk about disagreements, forgiveness and reconciliation is of course bound by the commandment to love. We hear it every week,

Love the lord you God. **Love you neighbour as yourself.**

The reading from Romans is headed “**love fulfils the law**”. I thought here might have been a bit of impatience in Pauls words – “surely any fool knows what we ought to be doing – any law can be summed up Love your neighbour”. Paul is not advocating a saccharine, superficial profession of love for the entire world, a love that never manages to find its way into the nitty gritty of everyday life. Paul is calling us to the difficult job of real love for real people, the ones we meet every day. It takes time and effort and it means genuinely getting to know each other.

Would you like to be loved superficially as if you had no qualities of your own? I know I would not. I want to be loved for me, who I am warts and all because that’s how Jesus loves me and though many times he must put his head in his hands and say “Oh no, here she goes again!” I know that I am forgiven, I am restored, I am loved. So are you. When we know that, we can truly love our neighbour as ourselves.

When we become part of a Christian community, we bind ourselves to each other with the Lord Jesus as our head. We are not free from each other but free in each other, which is why it is so important that we take this teaching Jesus gives us so seriously. What makes it imperative that we put all of this into practice, both in our church community and outside, is that time is of the essence; there is urgency because what happens genuinely matters. Paul reminds that

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

He urges us to put on the armour of light. And to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ

How we deal with forgiveness and reconciliation, how we love our neighbour, is the same wherever we are, in this place and all the places we find ourselves this week. When those dots are joined up, then we truly live the Jesus shaped life that is not only upside down and back to front but is also joyous and beautiful because we walk in the light of Christ.

Amen