

Sermon: Sunday Sept 6th. Matthew 18:15-20

Being real!

One of the fake portraits of Jesus, apart from the fair complexion, blonde hair, and blue eyes, is that he was gentle Jesus meek and mild. I don't know who it was who first penned those words in a Sunday School hymnbook, but I don't think they could have read the gospels very much at all.

The Jesus we are listening to in this part of Mathews gospel is talking hard stuff. He is dealing with the realities of life. So, someone does you wrong, disrespects your view, deliberately sets out to hurt you. What do you do? Many non-believing critics would expect Christians to behave like doormats, and just take it, smile beatifically and just fade away. But here Jesus has a different view. In his teaching for the disciples he sets out clear processes.

Don't make it public, going out of your way to tell everyone what has happened, but privately go up to the person who has hurt you, and explain to them how you feel. Give them an opportunity to reflect and see your position, and hopefully by discussing it quietly together you can resolve the problem,

But what if they won't or can't listen? What do you do then? Well, says Jesus, you find someone that you trust...someone who is wise, who can see both sides of an argument, you go see them, explain the situation and see if they would be willing to go along with you, as an arbitrator or a mediator. You go peacefully together, ideally three or for of you, but not as a mob ready to beat your opponent into submission, but rather to listen, to share and hopefully create a comfortable outcome where peace is restored. This is tough stuff, I told you so... it is certainly not shrugging your shoulders and going off to sulk, this is love IN ACTION.

And, what if the person in question still refuses to see your position, acknowledge the hurt that they caused, and found a mutual place of forgiveness and acceptance, ...what then?

Jesus teaching has a consequential element to it. If God is love and the source of love is God, if we invite God to live and work through us, then love will always find a way forward, and if people refuse to do so, the only logical explanation is that they are not "of God", and therefore should be removed from the fellowship, I suppose a gentle way of saying "no longer part of the club", "membership withdrawn!", even perhaps "Excommunication"???well no, that is interestingly not what Jesus says. He says that you should treat them as if they were a Gentile.... or a tax collector.

There are the very people to whom Jesus challenges us to witness to, so he is not saying we are to cast the awkward squad out into eternal darkness, but rather to see them as someone who needs to be shown what being a follower of Jesus, a Christian is all about. That is a long way from the "meek and mild" stuff, isn't it? It is also not easy to do, to face up to our hurts, to reflect on them, and then go and try talk to the person who hurt us is demanding and its very grown-up. When I am hurt I subconsciously slip into my withdrawn sullen little boy persona, who at best blames himself, at worst allows that hurt to simmer and fester until it turns into something more unpleasant.

Over and over again Jesus teaches his disciples about love, real love. A love that is not just willing but prepared to forgive people 70 x 7. A love that is so sacrificial it demands not just your coat but your shirt and your vest if needed. A love that is ultimately seen in the offering of life itself.

Matthew chapter 18 is like the toughest HR manual you could ever be given to read through. So, if this is true.... how come reality is different? How come the history of the Church, never mind

civilisation, is peppered with stories of splits and schisms? How is it that Christian countries have lost the vision of love being the only way? Well, to find the answer to that perhaps we need to look closer to home.

The adage practice what you preach is never more true.

How open to these rules of tough love am I?

How willing am I to live the Jesus version of sacrificial love?

How often o I pause in the middle of a stressful day and ask myself "what would Jesus do?"

The final part of our reading today offers us some hope and some help, as Jesus reminds us that He is always with us, what ever we are doing...that's a double edged sword too, he never misses what we do, he is after all omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, all present, all powerful, all knowing. So, we need never feel alone, but equally we can never pull the wool over his eyes.

When we try, Jesus is here,

When we fail, Jesus is here,

When we succeed, even just a little, Jesus is here.

And as he calls us to follow him, we need never be afraid.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.