

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples, "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 along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to 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.

"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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

REFLECTION 1: THE FIRST EUCHARISTS

Have you ever wondered what an early Eucharist was like? How the Mass as we celebrate it today evolved? Well, the earliest Christian communities did not just gather for the Eucharist or for prayer in common. They often lived in the same area of a town or city. They shared their property with one another, looked after their sick, provided for the decent burial of poorer members and kept an open door for Christians on their travels. The community's Eucharist was not simply a ritual meal in which a small portion of bread and a little wine were shared. It included a substantial meal provided by those who hosted the celebration. At the beginning of the meal, in keeping with the Jewish tradition, a blessing was said over the bread and wine. At the end of the meal there was time for sharing and instruction. The whole event was known as the 'Lord's Supper'.

In such close-knit communities disagreement between individuals had the potential for poisoning the atmosphere for others. Jesus in today's Gospel proposes a three-step process for solving such disputes (Matt 18: 15-20). Those in disagreement are expected to meet to clear the air. This reminds us of Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount that 'if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother/sister has something against you, first be reconciled with your brother/sister and then come and offer your gift'. If this doesn't work, then those in dispute should invite two or three others to act as brokers. If this fails the third step is to submit the dispute to a meeting of the whole church community to find a solution. If one of the parties refuses to accept the mediation he/she is to be excluded and treated 'like a Pharisee or Publican'. This is a drastic step, but it recognizes that if action is not taken and bitterness is allowed to fester it has the potential to destroy a close-knit community.

The programme for resolving disputes in today's Gospel is challenging. It gives great scope for quiet diplomacy behind the scenes. We all know that in close-knit societies it is important for people not to lose face, even when they seem to be in the wrong. Jesus' advice is to work for a resolution where there are no winners or losers. A person may be in the right but do we really gain much by having our opponents lose face? The price of momentary 'victory' might be a long legacy of smoldering resentment. Today gives us a chance to take stock of how we deal with day-to-day disagreements with our families and between neighbours and friends. Perhaps St. Patrick's counsel may encourage us; *'May the strength of God pilot us, may the power of God preserve us, may the wisdom of God instruct us, may the hand of God protect us, may the way of God direct us, and may the shield of God defend us'. Amen.*

REFLECTION 2:

SEEKING THE STUBBORN

In just over a decade, Facebook has gone from a startup to a social network with over 2 billion users and Twitter has over 300 million active users. In this short period of time, through social media, people have found a new voice, a new way to connect.

In today's Gospel (Matt. 18:15-20), we learn that 2,000 years ago Jesus also told us that there is power in numbers. First he says, 'If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven'. And then he says, 'Where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. Jesus offers a procedure for helping others to see the error of their ways and turn again to God. This procedure probably reflects the situation of the Evangelist's own community in the 80s. It was intended not to alienate or isolate wrongdoers but to encourage their conversion. In his reflection on mutual correction, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the willingness to admit wrongdoing before God and also as a process of liberation. While sin isolates one from the other, the admission of sin empowers fellowship and so strengthens believers to resist sin altogether. This breakthrough, though often painful, leads to new life. When we call sin by its name and repent of it, we break its dominion and a new beginning becomes possible. What Jesus was saying was: 'If anyone sins against you, spare no effort to make that person admit the fault, and get things right again between you'. Basically, it means that we must never tolerate any situation in which there is a breach of personal relationships between us and another member of the Christian community. If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should put our complaint into words. The worst thing we can do about a wrong is to brood over it – that is fatal. It can poison heart and mind until we can think of nothing else but our sense of personal injury. Any such feeling should be brought out into the open, only then will we see how trivial the whole affair is. If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it, namely face to face.

If a private and personal meeting fails in its purpose, we should take other people along with us as witnesses should a charge be sustained. What Jesus said is something like this, 'When you have given wrongdoers every chance and they still remain stubborn, you may think that they are no better than tax collectors, or even Gentiles. Well, you might be right. But I have not found the tax-collectors and the Gentiles hopeless cases. My experience is that they too have hearts to be touched and there are many of them, like Matthew and Zacchaeus, who are among my special friends. Even if the stubborn sinners are like tax-collectors or Gentiles, you may still win them over as I have done'. Jesus regards no one as a hopeless case and neither should we. The Christian community must look beyond justice to mercy, in order to absolve and reconcile.