

Pentecost 16
4/9/2005

Mark the Evangelist

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

If a member sins...

Recently a colleague from another denomination explained he is in trouble with his governing body because he had allowed a Catholic priest to preach in his church. As it turned out the colleague was being asked to apologise, not only for his deviant behaviour, but for the perceived damage a press report of the event had done to the church.

The history of the Australian church includes debates about sectarian purity, and heresy. Charles Strong, a Presbyterian who resigned over a heresy charge and then founded the Australian Church in 1884, was at the centre of one debate, as was Samuel Angus in Sydney. In the 1990s Archbishop Stylianos of the Greek Orthodox Church managed to have two priests serving in Australia dismissed and de-frocked, a sign of internal conflict within the Greek Christian community. We also know that in recent times various Catholic scholars have been banned from teaching for apparently espousing ideas that were regarded as unorthodox. And we know of conservative Christian groups who shun members whom they believe have sinned against their rules. All of these stories are about the exercise of Church Discipline. In earlier times that referred to the policies and beliefs of the church which, if not properly observed, led to people being challenged and even cut off from the community of faith.

The setting for today's reading is a long discourse on life together in the community of the church. It begins in response to a question from the disciples about "Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom?" Jesus is clear - the most values are the "little ones" - those who maintain a humble attitude of living in honour and trust of God. He teaches that such humility should prevail in the church, and special care is to be offered to the more vulnerable members. The key paradigm is that of the Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep demonstrating God's seeking love.

The section beginning: If another member of the church sins, offers a simple three-step process for dealing with deviant behaviour in the Body of Christ. It has never become enshrined in Uniting Church polity, but it is worth heeding nevertheless. It is clear from this process that in Matthew's Church not every difference will be tolerated and, where an unrepentant attitude persists in the face of an honest challenge, people risk being cut off. Because the section concludes with a reference to excommunication we can be forgiven for reading this as a plan for excluding people from the flock. It is actually a process for retaining errant members in the fellowship. We could call it a structure for reconciliation. Excommunication occurs only when all other efforts to return a member to the fold have failed.

There is a reference here to binding and loosing. A couple of weeks ago we came upon this in connection with Peter who, under divine inspiration, was able to name Jesus as the Messiah, and was given the keys to the Kingdom. Because of his faith Peter was raised up as one with the knowledge of where the source of life is to be found. And he

was called to open this source of life to others. There was another side. Christ who would be with him as he let people in would also be present when the other decision had to be taken. This picture of the power of God at work through Peter is transferred to the congregation. This is what is meant by the text about where 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus' name. It is not an apology for small congregations. It is a promise that where disciples act faithfully to seek reconciliation, Christ in the power of the Spirit will share the journey with them. The Uniting Church believes Christ is so present with us. Paragraph 4 of the Basis of Union says: Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his church.

Excommunication is not mentioned here, and we tend not to use the word at all. There is nothing wrong with being positive. The power of the keys, deputised to the Church by God in Christ, is first and foremost the power to reconcile people to God. Later Jesus has some harsh things to say about the religious leaders who condemned him for his deviant behaviour in welcoming tax collectors and sinners: Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites! For you lock people out of the Kingdom of Heaven. For you don't go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. (23:13)

Compared to this, in today's reading we have a series of statements that show unequivocally the lost are to be sought, the one who offends is to be spoken to, and the church is called to help the gathering in. We would do well to remember the three stages of dealing with someone who sins, especially the first step. How hard it is to speak up, and to speak up when it is you who have been wronged.

One of the things that has characterised the Uniting Church has been that it tends to have leadership with a broad-minded style. This has the effect of allowing the church to have within it a widely varied mixture of influences. The challenge is for us to work out where the limits are, while keeping in mind the law of love and the call to seek the lost. And while we have a Code of Ethics and a set of Regulations, one thing is for certain, unless we have some idea of what our core expectations are concerning belief and practise, it is impossible to discern what the limits should be in any situation.

And there is another thing. Sin in this reading means a deviation in belief or practise, but the prime concern is that a break occurs in the community life we are called to in Christ. If it breaks the fellowship, it has to be addressed, with all due love and care. What Matthew offers for congregational life would be good practise in any situation but it is predicated on a basis of humility that may not fit public and political life in which people are oriented to power play, and where belligerence and arrogance rule.

Tolerance is a concept much loved in liberal democratic societies. We are living through a time when we have to reflect upon the question of how tolerant to be. What do we do when a policy of toleration has allowed room for intolerance to grow? How do we figure out where to set limits? For Matthew the issue is we cannot leave unchallenged a person who abuses the fellowship. The Gospel is not intended to embrace or endorse community-breaking behaviour. But the intervention we make is intended to be transformative: to create a positive situation out of something that is bad. There is always the possibility that a person will have an impervious heart and resist all overtures. But the bottom line is Matthew envisaged a Christian Community that lives by a discipline of loving. This practise is one that expresses an outward going concern for the other and works for their good, and for their place in the fellowship. This is entirely consistent with the way Paul pictures living by Gods Law of Love. This love is

long suffering and accepting, and seeking, as is God's love towards us. If a limit is imposed on such love it is this. Love is given so that there might be a relationship of responding love. Love is given that where once there was brokenness there might be community. Love is given that where there was deathly isolation, there might be life.