

Pentecost 14
10/9/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Matthew 18:15-20

Irreconcilable differences

“If a brother sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained him. 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 he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let such a him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

We can imagine that this process has been faithfully applied in a literal sense many times in the last 2000 years. Yet a “faithful” application of the process is not necessarily a *good* one. We can also imagine that the application of this process has often led to great injustice. This might be the case when the one accused of sin is actually the prophet, standing courageously against an unjust congregational practice or culture and being named “sinner” for her trouble.

The scenario Jesus describes here, then, is idealised; things are rarely this straightforward. The biblical text does not deal with all scenarios. We have comprehensive legislation for that kind of coverage, and case law to cover what the legislation doesn’t. This is why we need (or at least *use*) lawyers; but the Scripture does not facilitate in the practice of law in this way.

Rather, this idealised example stands for, or represents, *all* instances of the rupture of a Christian community. It stands, then, even for what seem to us to be impossible and intractable situations, in which we might find it impossible to clarify blame or to forgive as our reading might imply should be the case.

What are we to do with today’s text, then? The context might help. *Preceding* today’s reading is the parable of the lost sheep, in which the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine he still has to go searching for a lost one, and rejoices more over the found one than the ninety-nine not lost. *Following* today’s reading is Jesus putting it to Peter that forgiveness might be required of him to the extent of seventy times seven times. These passages suggest that the overcoming of whatever separates us from God and from each other is paramount.

In between these two readings stands the shocking possibility of the excommunication that Jesus allows here, or even mandates. Where is the seventy times seven forgivings here?

Let’s allow that tension to hang for a moment, and note a couple of other things about our gospel reading this morning. After the possibility of excommunication, Jesus returns to the “binding” and “loosing” we met a couple of weeks ago: whatever you bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed heaven. This is reinforced in the next verse: “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” And then we hear why this is the case: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

These texts seem to work better for us when we don't hear them all together – the parable of the lost sheep, the challenge of endless forgiveness, the dispute resolution process for churchly conflicts, the uncomfortable binding of heaven linked with the doubtful promise about agreement in prayer and, finally, that wonderful invitation to self-congratulation, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”. By themselves we can make some sense of them but, in fact, they are *not* discrete texts: Matthew lumps them all together. This might have been because they sound like they're about the same kind of thing and so were gathered together for commonality's sake. That is, Matthew may or may not have had a clear thought about what putting these things together *meant*. But even if he did, *I* don't know what *he* was doing (and I'm going to presume that you don't either!). I, with you, have only the series of verses with their consistencies and contradictions, and an imperative to understand them.

What do we do when we can make no sense of the Scripture? One option is simply to let the absence of meaning stand. A preacher, however, can't quite do that. He or she is forced to *write* Scripture to fill the gaps, even to make the Scripture say what it seems it clearly does not, but must intend. This, of course, is a very impious proposal, and so you didn't hear it from me. However, impious or not, it is important for understanding the peculiar task of preaching. No sermon – and certainly not this one – carries the authority of Scripture for the church as a whole. The Scriptural canon is closed because in it *enough* – although not everything – has been said. A sermon exists for a local community in the space between the “everything” which *might* have been said and the “enough” which *has* been said. A sermon is something which *might* have been Scripture but doesn't *need* to be, because Scripture is already enough. We might say, then, that a sermon *extends* Scripture without quite *adding* to it. Or, to use a different metaphor: a sermon which meets its mark – striking the heart of the sinner – will from that point “infect” that heart's reading and hearing of the Scriptures. The Scripture takes on a new clarity because of the way it has been expounded.

How might this help here? Like all things which really matter, this is more easily demonstrated than described. We have left hanging the tension of today's reading with the preceding the parable of the shepherd's desire for the lost sheep and the following call to eternal forgivings. What is necessary for clarity and meaning here?

The new thing might be this: the excommunication of the unrepentant brother is not the *application* of the gospel, but the mandated sign of the *failure* of the gospel. In this failure – a *binding* – on earth, there is a binding in heaven. But heaven *bound* is no longer heaven. The failure of the gospel in our failure to live as God's reconciled and reconciling people is, already, the *failure* of our prayer – we are not in agreement and so our prayers are not granted. And, finally: we have generally been given to imagine, on the strength of today's text, that *only* two or three are necessary to get Jesus into the room, so that the presence of Jesus seems to be the easiest of things to effect. But we might also say that the sheer scale of the call to forgiveness and reconciliation surrounding this text is such that it will take a loosing of all of heaven and all of earth for two or three to come together in this way. *In human terms*, this is not going to happen.

But, of course, the Jesus who is present to the two or three is not gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild but the crucified Lord. We imagined a couple of weeks ago that, when given authority to bind and loose, the church sought immediately to bind Jesus. This led to Jesus proposing the cross as what it would take to loose both heaven and earth from

such a binding. It is the cross which would appear among us, if we were to gather “in his name”.

Thinking about church life – reconciliation, authority, prayer and the very presence of God – cannot be done *and be Christian* without the cross. A church which excommunicates is an impossible possibility which only the cross can treat.

Excommunication is impossible if the church is reconciling in its nature, but it happens, of course. Or, if as in churches like the UCA, it *doesn't* happen, we still fail by baptising unbaptised “diversity.” Nothing is easy here – not the life of the Christian community, not its prayer, not its experience of the presence of Christ.

What does all this mean? It means that we have nothing we can do but throw ourselves onto the mercy of God, as we work for reconciliation, make our rules, pray, and seek to gather as God's very presence.

This mercy, we believe, takes shape precisely *as* we gather. Here – in this space – Christ, *as the crucified one*, is “remembranced” – made real to us again. “Do this for the remembrance of me” is to say, Do this, that I might be among you again. *This* is to say, Do this, that the reality – the judgement and the mercy – of the cross might be in your midst, judging and dividing, forgiving and reconciling.

It is in the Eucharist, *as the presentation of the cross*, that all our gatherings and our hopes for gatherings have their meaning. It is in the Eucharist, *as prayer*, that all of our prayers take their meaning and seek their union. It is in the Eucharist, *as the re-present-ing of the Jesus*, that we encounter the mystery of the cross – the mystery of one who loved abundantly more that he *was* loved, and who continues to do so, that we might know *ourselves* as loved despite the poverty of our Christian community and the contradictions of our prayers and visions of God.

The work towards reconciliation, the making of our rules and regulations, the prayer for the ourselves and the world must, of course, go on. But it is in the cross – God's crossed-shaped key to heaven and to earth – that these things are effective, for us and for the world God loves.

Let us, then, in all that we do as God's people, let the light of the cross be the light in which we seek to see and be seen.
