

Sunday 17 September 2023 – Trinity 15

Romans 14.1-12; Matthew 18.21-35

In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel we are treated to a whole block of moral teaching. At the beginning Jesus swiftly and firmly deals with his disciples on the issue of "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?" by stating that true greatness requires true humility, such as may be found in a little child. But it soon becomes clear that in referring to "little ones" Jesus means the community of believers. In verse 6 onwards he changes his tone to one of warning: to cause a believer to be misled or perverted morally warrants a fate worse than not just death, but by being thrown into the sea with a millstone round the neck. God will protect true believers. God sees to it that in harming others, we harm and debase ourselves in the eyes of the Almighty. So we always have to be on the lookout in our own behaviour, and we know that God will help us to do so – as illustrated in the story of the lost sheep in verses 10-14.

Jesus is talking in the context of living in a Christian community, which implies support in difficult circumstances, and we all experience these in our daily lives. Hence the helpful suggestion to take up an issue which has arisen with the person concerned, talk it through and hope to achieve a peaceful resolution. Jesus goes on to suggest that if that doesn't work, to take another member of the community with us, and otherwise to take it to the community as a whole. Jesus' suggestion of, in effect, excommunication is extreme and not a good advertisement for any community. Incidentally there is a long history of this approach in the Jewish tradition, so it would have resonated with the disciples.

As I said, Jesus is talking here in the context of life in a Christian community, and that life vitally includes prayer, which itself includes prayer for the forgiveness of our own mistakes and failings. We do this at the start of every Eucharistic service, and of course every time we say the Lord's Prayer. Last Thursday we celebrated Holy Cross Day with its emphasis on what the death of Jesus has achieved for us – forgiveness and eternal life.

This brings me (at last, you might think) to the part of Matthew's Chapter 18 which we have heard this morning. It's all about forgiveness, which is a really testing topic. Peter's question to Jesus is about the number of times we should forgive if we think we have been wronged: seven times, or.....? Famously Jesus replies no, but says seventy seven times, in other words there should be no limit to the extent of feeling forgiveness in our hearts. As one of my commentaries puts it: forgiveness acts as a hedge against rigidity and absolutism.

Well, make of that what you will – there is no denying that forgiving from the heart can be an incredibly difficult thing to do. I'll never forget the example of a man called John Wilson, whose daughter was killed in the Omagh bombing in 1998, just after the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland had been signed. He said he forgave the bombers, even if he could not possibly forget what they had done. Compare that with something I have come to regret: having spent 20 difficult years as Churchwarden in a City of London church I was astonished at the AGM to have a bottle of port in a plastic bag plonked in front of me with the words "Thank you for all you have done" and that was it. Being convinced I should have had much more gratitude poured over me, I harboured a grudge – until, not long afterwards, I heard that the priest-in-charge was having serious family problems. I hope I have been forgiven.

In reality we are called to live out the Christian life, in the world as we find it, whether as members of a Christian community or not and if not then at least following moral and ethical principles. We are summoned to follow Christ's standard of behaviour, while being conscious of sin in ourselves and in the world. Just look at what's happening in Ukraine and in the world at large. Therefore humility is the catchword, and with prayer we should not be surprised if in any given situation the Holy Spirit has already been at work to effect reconciliation. The story of the unforgiving servant is a healthy reminder to all of us and certainly to me of the alternative.

15.9.2023

