

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 10th

Reading: Matthew 18: 15 – 20 [14th after Pentecost – “Ordinary Time”]

This is a difficult passage for us. Is it simply because the notion of telling someone else they have ‘wronged’ is so unpalatable to most of us? Perhaps we are all, at core, conflict avoiders. And it is seemingly not Australian to want to ‘point the finger’. Or is that there is a cultural and historical gap between us and such instructions in Matthew’s Gospel? In the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary scholar New Testament commentator Eugene Boring explains: “*Matthew’s community orientation and our individualistic one come into sharp conflict*” [Commentary on Matthew, page 379]. Community is a concern and theme of Matthew’s Gospel. We have seen previously that he considers that a ‘new community’ is developing around this new faith. One of Matthew’s purposes is to shape that community. There is a trace of early sect behaviour in these words. And such tight-knit groups with defined boundaries did proliferate in Jesus’ time [think of the Essenes and Zealots alongside the Dead Sea].

Matthew’s Gospel, has likely taken up needs in his own community to address in recording his story of Jesus. What Matthew spends six (6) verses on here, Luke has covered in a single verses [17: 3 “*So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them*”]. Verses 15 – 20 of this chapter belong in this context. All of chapter 18 might be termed ‘rules of community’. It begins with the community debate about greatness [verses 1- 5], then addresses the treatment of those who cause others to stumble [verses 6 – 9], before a long parable about the essential need to forgive [verses 23 – 35]. Perhaps these verses about rebuke of wrong in the community are prefaced by taking the humble stance of a child! (the demonstration of the first five verses of this chapter). Or fulfilled in the inescapable need to forgive.

The protocols for community conflict outlined commend a step-wise process: where there has been a wrong, first go and point it out in private, away from the community. If that fails, repeat the confrontation in the eyes of witnesses. Only after repeated failure should a community rejection be contemplated. Malina and Rohrburgh in their “*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*” describe this “*procedure for conflict resolution as ‘confrontation’ (v15), ‘negotiation’ (v16) and ‘adjudication’ (v17)*”. [page 119]. To call upon a third party is very Middle Eastern. I have experienced this in an argument over a taxi fare in the Egyptian city of Alexandrina, where a complete stranger passing by was summonsed into our dispute and asked to independently give an impartial ‘judgement’.

It is to be noted that this is not a course for self-justification, protections over individual wrongs or slights that seem to mark conflicts in the contemporary church. These are matters of the health of the entire community. The New Interpreter’s Bible commentary notes that the ‘*against you*’ of verses 15 is missing in many ancient texts. This would make the grievance in the community less personal if it were the case. It further notes that “*the fact that trivial matters are not in view may be inferred from the seriousness of the penalty in verse 17*” [Matthew, page 378]. The first century mind did not work to defend personal honour or fault. People thought, felt and responded in group behaviours. Again, this might explain why words of communal rebuke and correction are alien in our culture and day.

The final resort in this passage is to treat the offender “*like a Gentile or a tax collector*”. This seems contradictory as these are the very people Jesus gave time and place to! Even Matthew’s Gospel itself has already issued words of understanding and empathy: “*do not judge*”, “*Why consider the speck in someone’s eye when yours bears a log?*” (7: 1 – 5) and the warning of the Parable of the weeds growing amongst the wheat – not to be separated (13: 26 – 30). The New Interpreter’s Commentary suggests that “*these tensions may be due to the incorporation of conflicting traditions in the history of the community’s*

development [page 378]. In other words, we have slipped into the thought and teaching of Matthew's specific local community and left behind the encompassing love of Jesus.

In today's church kindness often rules over truth and justice. We are reluctant to exercise the example of facing up to community realities that we find Matthew ordering in his community. Instead, people sometimes are given room for all sorts of petty rivalries and jealousies. Rather than heed the harsh directive suggested by this passage, we are often inclined to tell someone else instead of the person who has wronged us. This soon turns to gossip. It doesn't invite forgiveness as the conflict goes underground and becomes passive.

Where might we see Matthew's bold process enacted? In our own homes when we speak our 'truth', whilst remaining open to another family member? Prompted by these words of intended peace-making, the "Spill the Beans" resources this week notes the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' that operated in South Africa post-apartheid as a means of "*enabling the nation to face up to the wrong that had been committed so that healing and not further harm might happen*". That resource notes "*The South African model of reconciliation is, itself, deeply influenced by the biblical imperative to reconciliation ... found in the words of Matthew 18.*"

On the international scale, this 'model' of addressing conflicts would lead us to rely on diplomacy rather than armed conflict.

THEMES: Community living, speaking truth, reconciliation.