

Sermon on Matthew 18: 15-20

So, those of you who are regulars here at Bowral will know I quite like to make reference to certain movies now and then.

My penchant for referring to films is not often matched by your familiarity with the ones I mention, but that's another story.

But today I have a question I'm almost sure I can predict a positive answer to...how many of you have at some point had an altercation with someone else in the church?

It seems like the church is a particularly fertile place for conflict, personal and communal.

Umberto Eco in his wonderful story *The Name of the Rose*, makes this point succinctly in a scene where the Franciscan Monks and The Benedictines end up pulling each other's beards out over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

You only need to take a quick trip along Bendooley Street here in Bowral and work your way from the Catholic, to the Presbyterian, to the Uniting, to the Anglican, churches, not to mention the Church of Christ and Baptist churches perched on side streets, to sense that Christians have had their differences over the time.

In a recent issue of the *Jordan's Crossing Magazine* there was an old picture of Bundanoon when it was still mainly a farming community.

There are only two buildings in the photo, two churches, a stone's throw away from each other in a community which then would only have been a few hundred.

I was talking with another minister yesterday who was saying that the church she grew up in is now a kickboxing centre.

Sadly, on occasions churches have felt like combat zones.

But none of this is anything new.

The Bible is actually fairly replete with conflictual encounters.

In our Tuesday evening Bible Study we recently read through Galatians 2 where Paul says, 'When Peter came to Antioch I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong.'

Not much room for interpretation there.

Internal conflict has always been a part of the church's experience and in one sense it is appropriately so.

The very DNA of the church brings us into the realm of life and death, of creation and cosmos, of the deepest longings and struggles of people's lives.

Sometimes the call of the Kingdom means we ought to be pushing each other to reach for the truth with all our being.

Paul certainly felt that by withdrawing from the Gentile Christians Peter was threatening the new vision of radical equality the church presupposed and so it was worth the confrontation.

In actual fact, most of the New Testament assumes that the church will be a pretty robust place with disagreement and argument, some healthy and appropriate, some not.

Why would Paul repeatedly counsel his fledgling churches to seek to be at peace if it were not so?

Interestingly, Matthew's Gospel is the only one to mention and reflect on the church.

The others don't say much about it, at least not directly in the way Matthew does.

It does seem odd that the church is itself so little spoken of in the Gospels.

The Greek word Matthew uses to speak of the church is a familiar one to us.

It is made up of two smaller Greek words, ek, meaning 'out' and klesis meaning 'call'.

The church is the ek-klesis, the ecclesia.

And it is comprised of those who are called of the Lord.

Those 'called out', those re-born to be different in the world, to be salt and light, to be the counter society where love and peace reign, where God's Kingdom shines brightest and no-one is left behind.

Its original meaning is simply 'assembly'.

But the church is more than simply an assembly.

It is the assembly of the faithful who come together week by week to worship and witness and who are bound by faith in the love of God.

The church belongs to God as do we, as does our very faith.

And so it is never something we can contrive, never something we can control for our own ends.

The church is God's and exists not for its own sake, but to give glory to God.

It is renewed and ruled by Christ alone.

This is how Jesus can say, 'Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.'

We don't make the church, Jesus does.

It was remarked once that the thing Christians have in common is not their common humanity, not their common 'flesh' as it were, but the church.

The church is what Christians have in common and what binds them together across time and place.

It is the special nature of the church, its unique purpose and being, that sits behind Matthew's recording of these words of Jesus which have to do with discipline in the church.

The church is not easy in any way.

Sometimes people will say that they can be a Christian without coming to church and while I mainly disagree with that view, I can well understand the attraction of it.

As those gathered in God, the church presupposes that there is no distinction between persons before God.

Whatever your status in the world, whatever your wage is, whatever your gender, ethnicity, age, whatever your history or family or financial situation, in the church you are as beloved of God as the next person.

And as worthy of dignity, respect, and the love of neighbour as anyone else.

And remember that in the early church this meant that slave and master would sit in the same assembly together and be counted no different, at least in God's eyes.

As Rowan Williams says, the idea that every person is equally beloved, and therefore equally due respect and dignity in this way is not at all self-evident.

History shows us this pretty conclusively.

At every opportunity human beings have sought to create divisions and distinctions which separate the haves from the have nots.

We're still doing it today...

Yet it is at the heart of the church's unique proclamation, the proclamation of Christ, that, as Paul says, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, no male or female, no slave or free... all are one.

So in the church, the sacred assembly, we are joined in love to others in our midst who may be the polar opposite of ourselves, may drive us up the wall, may irritate and confuse us, or may have wholly divergent views on any manner of things.

And then we're asked to love each other and hold together as a body.

When you think about it, the church is the least likely thing to exist in the world.

It isn't easy.

It would be far easier for us each to say, we'll keep to ourselves thanks, and we're happy to love each other as long as we can do it from a distance where it doesn't require anything of us.

But such a view mistakes what the church is really like.

It's not just any assembly.

Not just any group of people who have gotten into a satisfactory routine.

It's the assembly of the risen Christ, exists in his risen power, and holds together by his grace.

This makes it very, very different from anything else which remotely resembles it.

This difference in nature requires, as Matthew records, a different understanding of how the church deals with conflict and sin.

That there will be conflict and sin is taken for granted.

The telling word Matthew records in the first verse of this passage is the word for 'brother', or extended, brother and sister.

'If a brother or sister sins against you.', that is, if someone in the church sins against you.

We're talking family conflict here.

'If a brother or sister in Christ sins against you.', this is what you must do.

Jesus then lays out a progressive process whereby the sin (and sinner) is addressed, challenged, and, uncomfortable as it may seem to us today, ultimately sent out of the assembly if there is no repentance.

The subtext of this passage is not hard to discern.

It assumes that the church is made to be one, made to be whole and holy, that sin and conflict pose a real threat to this sacred unity in Christ and so shouldn't be ignored.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are thus sought at every step and it is by no means coincidental that in the very next passage when Peter asks Jesus how often we should forgive, Jesus' answer is forever.

You shall be forever forgiving. 70 x 7.

The onus, somewhat surprisingly, is on the affected party to initiate the process towards healing, again, something which works against the grain of our intuition.

If it doesn't work one to one, take two. If it doesn't work with 2 or 3 – 1, then tell the church, if that still doesn't set the course on the way to reconciliation, then, for the sake of whole, the unrepentant sinner must be expelled.

Again, this sounds harsh, but Jesus is really trying to say that in such an instance, and they are certainly rare in my experience, it is the unrepentant person who is by their actions placing themselves outside of the communion of the church.

It is a choice they are making themselves in refusing to repent.

The church, by expelling the unrepentant one, is simply being true to their own actions.

Without repentance, reconciliation, healing, love, the church is not really the church at all, and so when there are folk who refuse to enter into such a movement towards new life, they are in effect saying, ‘we don’t belong to the church anyway.’

As hard as it is for us to accept, the ultimate move this passage recommends is a loving one.

We love each other enough, and cherish our communion in Christ passionately enough, that we can’t tolerate sin that would break it down.

Now at this point we need to take a deep breath and step back for a moment.

It is in practice, of course, generally nowhere near as simple as I’ve just suggested for a whole number of reasons.

We need to be careful here and recognise that great hurt can be done unnecessarily if we are unwise in how we interpret and act, particularly in view of a passage such as this which marks out a pretty well defined process.

When I asked at the beginning if you’d known conflict in your church life, let me ask another (rhetorical) question, how often did the conflict end well?

How often did it lead to new life rather than further pain?

How often did it provide kairos moments of the Kingdom emerging in the midst of the church rather than the Devil dividing it?

Most of the time, in my experience, conflict in the church doesn’t end well.

For all our claiming the church as a unique community and theologising about the wonders of God’s new creation etc, we’re as broken and sinful as anyone else and too often it shows.

BB Taylor once wrote, ‘we’re taught in the church from a young age that we shouldn’t fight and so we’re terrible at it.’

It is the spirit of this passage, rather than the letter we should in the first place be paying attention to.

The Spirit of the passage is that sin breaks the church down and reconciliation builds it up.

So seek forgiveness, reconciliation, healing in all you do, and take sin and conflict seriously enough to do something about it.

Jesus, as we know, leaves the 99 sheep to seek after the 1 lost in order to bring it back to the fold.

Don't let sin linger because it will only weaken you and so weaken the church.

Every week we come to church and confess our sins together and receive forgiveness, not from the minister, but from God.

And we can go on again with humble hearts and call each other brother and sister in the family of God because we are forgiven and reconciled to God through Christ.

Jesus here wants to say in the church, you must actually live in the light of this reality.

It's no good simply hearing the absolution week to week and then going on the way you prefer to anyway.

You must seek after forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, together, even when it's messy, conflicted, and difficult as it so often is.

The truth, the reality of the church, means it must be so.

And it is by this very seeking after loving engagement with each other that you will truly be the church.

It takes great courage and faith to speak to each other about hurts we create and to listen.

It means taking our common life together more seriously than whether we're right or wrong in any given circumstance.

It takes courage to speak and courage to listen, and courage on both sides to love and forgive and move on together in the church.

It's a great challenge.

It doesn't mean that every petty disagreement requires confrontation, we must read this passage in the light of the whole NT witness which in other places speaks of patience, longsuffering, grace.

It doesn't mean we're given permission to take the moral high ground...none of us can because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Incredibly, though, it is in acknowledging that sin is real and seeking to do something about it together, seeking to love, to forgive, to reconcile, that we give God the glory.

That together we truly are the church, the family of God who live in the light of God's love.

The church is not ours to control, it is God's gift in community where disparate people are drawn together in love.

People from all backgrounds and cultures, people all broken and searching for salvation.

People in large numbers or small.

We're reminded at the close of this passage what makes the church what it is, and will forever be.

'Wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in my name', Jesus says, 'there I am in their midst.'

That is the church from beginning to end.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

Amen.