

7 September 2014

Dealing with conflict Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13.8-14

I have recently been reading *Travelling Light, Your journey to Wholeness* by Daniel J O'Leary.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on his life, O'Leary writes some breathers and practical exercises to bring to a time of prayer. In the section I have been reading, he spends a bit of time on conflict and forgiveness. He asks: 'How do I transform the negative experiences of life in to light and energy? How do I reconcile and redeem what is sinful and hurtful? How do I become an alchemist, changing the dark lead of my days into pure and shining gold?' These are questions that are surely relevant to today's gospel passage.

This passage is one I am tempted to skip over because it seems both mundane and harsh at first reading. It would be easier to preach on Romans about love being the fulfilling of the law. But when we put this Gospel passage in its broader context, and in the light of current world events, we see that it has a lot to offer to us individually, as a community, and to the wider world. The theme of the whole of chapter 18 is dealing with people who go astray. Matthew surrounds the traditional rules of conflict resolution with the message of compassion and forgiveness.

What do we do when things go wrong in relationships? Do we try and work it out and then write people off when it doesn't? Do we persevere in reconciliation? Do we gossip about them? Scapegoat to make ourselves feel better?

O'Leary:

'So often when someone hurts us, all we do either in self-justifying anger, forced politeness, self righteous correcting or condescending forgiveness is to add force to the negative vibrations, by turning them round and redirecting them in an even more deliberately negative way, back the way they came.'....<sup>2</sup>

I am guilty of all of these at times. Often I avoid conflict sweeping the issues under the carpet to fester and grow.

The ultimate punishment is to be treated like a gentile or a tax collector. Yet, how does Jesus treat gentiles and tax collectors? Doesn't he earn his reputation precisely because of his openness to including gentiles and tax collectors in his community? Jesus became known as one who embraced those from whom he felt most repelled. Our passage contains tips for handling conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> *Travelling Light , Your journey to wholeness* Daniel J O'Leary, the Columba Press 2001

<sup>2</sup> op cit

It is almost September 11, and conflict continues. I wonder, can this passage also speak to international conflict or to issues of terrorism?

Loader<sup>3</sup>:

The passage reflects an application of justice which incorporates the biblical provision that charges must be supported by at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15).

'Then the next verses speak of the agreement of two or three on earth with regard to any request and to Jesus' presence in their midst. The passage is similar to those in the Jewish Mishnah which promise God's Shekinah, God's dwelling or settling, where two or three gather to study Torah. Jesus takes Shekinah's role, the role of God's presence' in the conflict.

'Of greater importance still, however, is the wider context. The verses which follow our passage, verses 21-22 contain Peter's question about forgiveness and Jesus' reply that forgiveness is possible not just 7, but 77 times. In other words forgiveness is never to be abandoned. More on that next week. Verses 23-35, the parable of the unforgiving servant, makes the same point. If this is not enough, the verses immediately preceding the disciplinary rule in today's gospel retell the parable of the lost sheep, only it now applies it to the issue of what to do when a community member goes astray (18:12-14). Compassion seeks the lost. If we go back further to 18:6-10, we return to issues of discipline: abuses against God's little ones: children but also members of the community of little ones, the congregation. The whole chapter begins with the lesson about greatness: to humble oneself as a child.'

'In this wider context Matthew has set what may well have been a bit of sectarian traditional wisdom about how to deal with deviance. While its rough edges remain, it is now heavily qualified. Without revising it directly, Matthew has set it in a context where all the emphasis falls on compassion and forgiveness. Matthew is not abandoning the need to confront abuse. Matthew is not espousing the kind of phoney harmony which sweeps abuse under the carpet in the name of Christian peace. But it is clear that he is not prepared to abandon people to being treated like second class citizens: Gentiles and tax collectors, although this is what the tradition had said. If we really rub these conflicting statements together and try to make them fit, we might end up with something like: treat them like Gentiles and tax collectors, people who no longer belong, and then relate to them the way Jesus related to toll collectors

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<sup>3</sup><http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPentecost13.htm>

and commissioned that we should relate to Gentiles: offer to them a relation of acceptance and forgiveness! Don't write them off!

'Honesty in confronting issues often makes such restoration possible, whereas half dishonest failure to name things leaves untended wounds which fester and, even in apparent reconciliation, the pain will be disruptive and is frequently destructive for all. Unfortunately Christians have been particularly good at replacing honest open love with being nice.' Loader

Loader again: 'First century conflict management suggests, if you have a problem with someone's behaviour, go and see them and talk with them about it. By implication, don't go and gossip to someone else about it. Every community needs to learn this, every generation, regularly. Deal with the issue where it belongs. There may be occasions where this is not the preferred action in terms of creative handling of the conflict. Sometimes one must go directly to the police or the body skilled to handle the issue (such as sexual abuse complaints). Sometimes our role will be to refer people to such authorities. But it is never right to go to others just to turn them against someone, in self indulgent gossip, which does not give the other person a chance. It is never right to play the game of gaining friendship with one person by denigrating another and enjoying the fellowship of denigration, which is so common.'

'At an international level the most obvious application is: negotiate. Don't rush to sabre rattling. Talk and listen. Seek to achieve settlement by meeting and talking, by seeking to appreciate the reasons why this or that unacceptable response has arisen. It also means avoiding the naive, not pretending there is no danger. At whatever level, we are ultimately dealing with human beings who are to be respected and honoured. Intervention by force to prevent violation of others is sometimes necessary, but should come as a last resort. Much more can be achieved through negotiation than is usually assumed'.

'The passage affords an opportunity to throw some gospel perspectives on the meaning of love and compassion in the handling of conflict in personal relations, in family, in church, in community, in international relations, because despite the complexities some principles remain and they are articulated here. Our strategies vary greatly whether we come at conflict from hate or love, whether we believe we must avoid conflict or not, whether we believe peace is niceness or responsible openness'.

In Romans 13.8 we heard 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law'

O'Leary<sup>4</sup> writes:

It is the work of a lifetime to take on ourselves "the mind of Christ", to fully and unconditionally love one another... 'To be a reconciler is to be one who fully lives out the dying and rising mystery of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

When I succeed in being a reconciler, instead of reacting to, resisting or reflecting back the negative emotions and attitudes of those around me, whether in a one to one, communal or wider context, I take into myself the jealousies, cynicism, bitterness and hurting of the people and the systems of my community. Like a re-cycler, a holy incinerator, a reconciler, I filter, through my redeemed essence, I transform, in my very own self, like Jesus did, the sins into graces, the curses into blessings, the destructive forces into life enhancing gifts. We are at the heart of the matter here...

It takes a lot to avoid complicity in scapegoating, to unite ourselves with the passion of Jesus. It is slow and risky work, and in the end, it is only compassion and prayer that can get us there, that can transform the negative..

'In his *conjectures of a guilty bystander*, Thomas Merton writes of a time when his understanding of Christianity was becoming truly catholic, and when he realised what the cost for him would be in trying to bring this about. As it was with Christ the reconciler so it would be with Merton. 'if I can unite in myself, he emphasised, the thoughts and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and Latin fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians.... We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ. All of this is uniquely the work of God.'

Bearwatcher, an Apache medicine man teaches:

'In the Apache language there is no word for 'guilt'. There is no word for 'shame'. Our lives are like diamonds. When we are born we are pure and uncut. Each thing that happens to us in our lives teaches us how to reflect the light of the world; each experience gives us a new cut, a new facet in our diamond. How brilliantly do those diamonds sparkle whose facets are many, to whom life has given many cuts!

So when you feel that the rain is no longer playful but harsh, and when the snow has lost its beauty, hold your diamond in your hand. Do not feel shame. Do not feel guilt. Think instead of the way you may now reflect the light of the world, and be thankful for the new cut you have received on your diamond'<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> op. cit. p94

<sup>5</sup> in O'Leary p95

Frances Mackay reflects in our weekly bulletin:  
'We have such power over one another: power to bless and power to wound.  
And what we do to another, we do to ourselves'.

Susanna Pain  
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