

Fr James' homily for the Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-9
Second Reading: Romans 13:8-10
Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20



Last Sunday we heard St Peter trying to persuade Jesus that he should not go to Jerusalem, to his suffering and death for the sins of the world. For this he was rebuked - his way of thinking was destructive, and not the way of God. St Peter essentially wanted a quiet life, as do we all. But, as the Church we must learn that we don't have that cosy option. To be a disciple of Jesus is to take the Way of the Cross, and that means standing up to opposition, to aggression towards the Gospel and to conflict.

The theme of the Gospel today is part of the ministry of reconciliation which is the life of the Church, the theme of what is referred to as "fraternal correction." We start here on difficult ground, for we live now in a society so incredibly sensitive to any form of criticism. "Who are you to tell me what's right" is the order of the day. Yet, at the same time the media, social media and everything else thrives on being hyper-critical of others. A good part of a daily examination of conscience is to ask ourselves how we have been critical in that way, and where the motivation might have come from.

The problem, though, is that the Lord clearly says that it is our duty to make judgements, criticisms and to seek to bring reconciliation. No quiet life for disciples, for by the grace of baptism we are all prophets, called to be watchmen for the "New Israel" which is the Church in the world.

This calling is based on two principles. First, that there is a clear objective norm to the moral life. Some things are good for us and some things are bad, always. This is fundamental to our faith but it is in direct opposition to the spirit of the age around us with its story of "I'm ok, you're ok" relativism in all things. Secondly we are part of a body, we are not individuals. Christ says he is the head of the body of which we are a part, and we have to be concerned for the whole, not just look after our own spiritual well-being.

Our calling is a recipe for hassle!! The Gospel today tells us how to go about constructively engaging with the difficult and often conflict-ridden business of trying to bring reconciliation and right thinking. First, says the Lord, seek to address a person in person, alone. How often is the first step in a disagreement to "go nuclear," to complain to others and out loud. Jesus tells us this will be destructive of ourselves

and of the whole body. We are called to undermine the destructive path of aggression, but that will be costly for us, for we cannot ignore the causes.

The Gospel then describes a slow process of bringing others into the debate, to try to heal the body, as it were, until the last resort is to let go and not engage any more. And always to wrap what we do in prayer, ending with that beautiful image of the Church together in prayer, for there Christ cannot fail to be present.

What this means, of course, is that where the Church works together to discern what is right, we will be shaped by the mind of Christ. We tend to read those words the opposite way round, as so often, instead thinking that if we get enough partisan individuals together God will do what we want!

Reconciliation is painful - look at the passion of Christ. Reconciliation starts with our own painful examination of conscience. We are no good to anyone else without it. Reconciliation means choosing the path of love, and that is also always painful, for to want what is truly good for another means making sacrifice and sometimes enduring confrontation and conflict. Our aim? To “loose” everything that needs loosing on earth, whatever the cost to us. As I often say, the only things “bound” on earth are those things we are too stubborn to bring to reconciliation. Let us pray always for grace to be prophets and to truly be the Church in the world.

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.