

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in OT (A)

7<sup>th</sup> September 2014

‘If your brother does something wrong ...’

Ezek 33: *warn the wicked man*    Ps 94: *harden not your hearts*  
Rom 13: *love your neighbour as yourself*    Mt 18: *winning back your brother*

These readings are the ones which greeted me for my first Mass as a priest 15 years ago. I remember speaking on that day about the Church as the place where repentance and forgiveness are most at home. It is exactly what today’s readings are all about, and it is also, to a large degree, what priesthood is about.

So, what of the readings? Ezekiel is being told by God that it is his duty as a prophet to tell people when they are in the wrong. Then St Paul is telling us that, better than a negative list of forbidden activities is the notion that the commandments are best summed up in the one positive virtue of loving your neighbour. So, which do we do? Do we follow Ezekiel and make sure that we let every wrongdoer know exactly the sins they’re committing? Or do we follow St Paul and love everybody and do them no harm, and let them be? Of course, we do a bit of both, but have a bad attitude to neither. The love which St Paul challenges us to show our neighbour should be a love which can encompass warning and rebuke. Love which says ‘leave alone and happily ignore wrongdoing’ is never true

love, just as no parent is going to let a child run around near a cliff edge and not say something — there’s no benefit in saying “Well, if that’s the way you want to live your life then it’s fine by me.” No — when our family and friends start disobeying the commandments, we’ve got to say something, to bring them back from the brink. I have found it one of the hardest things in the Christian life to risk a friendship by telling the truth — by saying out loud or putting on paper one’s belief that a dear one is in the wrong. And as a priest it’s even harder, this duty to help people keep to the ‘straight and narrow’ which Christ urges on us. But the truth has to be spoken, as long as it is spoken in love. There’s no merit in engaging in ‘megaphone diplomacy,’ shouting and hurling harsh rebukes. Look instead at what Jesus suggests in the Gospel today: the personal touch, taking one’s brother, one’s friend on one side and quietly telling him. God never shouts thunderous accusations from heaven. He always adopts the personal touch. That’s why He sent prophets like Ezekiel, and when not enough people listened to the prophets, He sent His only Son. How could God have got more personal in His plea to make us hear what was good for us than to become one of us, to speak face-to-face, quietly taking us on one side to say: “No, there is such a thing as wrongdoing, and

my love for you is such that I have to tell you.” Jesus was, in part, ignored, but He never stopped loving. Nor should we, even if we are hurt by our friend or a member of our family ignoring our urging them to return to the right path.

The Catholic Church *is* the safeguard of the truth Christ came to teach us: He wants to remain amongst mankind, and to keep telling us to do what He, as God, knows is right for our life — that’s why the Church has to exist! It is not there merely to determine doctrine of right and wrong (although Christ has given her His own power to do just that), but much more importantly, He gives us the Church to be the place where we can quietly and personally be taken on one side and each one of us helped slowly to correct our faults.

‘The Church is the home of reconciliation,’ the special place where God and man meet. During one of the African peace negotiations which resolved a long-running civil war — I can’t remember which one — the negotiators met in a lodge in remote Norway, far away from the fracas of the war, a place of quiet where the two sides could simply get to know each other. It was the personal touch, rather than any megaphone diplomacy, which resolved the war, and it relied on the charm of that special forest house.

Now the Church is exactly that sort of special place for God and us: a home for reconciliation, a place of charm which God never leaves, and is always ready on personal terms to meet us. Christ is the guarantee of all that, because in Jesus God and man can never be separated. So, in His body the Church, we are always united to God: “where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “I shall be there with them.” And just look at the gifts which God showers on us in Christ to help us be reconciled. One such gift for the Church is the priesthood, and it has to do with reconciliation. The priesthood to which I am ordained is fundamentally about serving the world, in preaching the full message of the truth (in being “the sentry,” as Ezekiel said) but also in giving people access to the great gifts of reconciliation — the sacraments especially of Confession and of the Holy Mass. Nowhere else can you find them but in Christ’s Holy Church, where you can learn the truth for sure, *and* also find forgiveness beyond measure.