

REFLECTION FOR SUNDAY 13TH SEPTEMBER 2020.

Matthew 18:21-35.

The verses that precede our passage today see Jesus describing how the church is to handle conflict after he has gone. Jesus assumes conflict in the church but says that the way the church will be different than anything before will be how it handles that conflict. The process that Jesus outlines focuses on restoration of the offender and not revenge for the offended. Furthermore, even if the offender must be asked to leave, the door will always remain open for them to come back into fellowship again – reconciliation is always the hope. Jesus tells his listeners that the church cannot give up entirely on anyone and that is how the church will be different.

In our passage from Matthews gospel, Peter takes Jesus aside and says ‘this all sounds wonderful. Direct communication, restoration of the offender, bringing them back into church but what I do not understand is how many times will I have to forgive them? I reckon seven times is probably plenty of forgiveness to offer but what do you think?’

In his question, Peter makes clear that he has understood part of Jesus’ teaching. Peter understands that the goal and the hope is restoration. The idea of restoration would have been radical enough of an idea. Even today restorative justice is not widely used outside of the church. Our justice systems often seek punishment first of all and then some baseline measure of justice in that people get what they deserve and then maybe a little more on top as a deterrent for others.

So Peter does see what Jesus is doing, this radical idea that our first priority as Christians should be reconciliation. What Peter doesn’t understand though is how far Jesus is willing to take this. Peter thinks he is being generous if he forgives somebody seven times. Jesus amazes Peter when he says seven times is not enough. Rather than seven times Jesus says try seventy seven times. Some Bible translations say seventy times seven. The exact number isn’t really important because what Jesus is saying to Peter and to us is if you are counting when it comes to forgiveness you are missing the point. Jesus uses the wonderful parable of the king who wishes to settle his accounts with his servants. We see a merciful king who rights off the debt of one of his servants and yet sadly the servant then shows he is incapable of doing the same for anyone else.

Jesus turns the tables on Peter and on us. Instead of giving us a set number to aim for when forgiving those who do us harm he reminds us that to be unforgiving makes us either forgetful or ungrateful.

Our ability to forgive should always come from a place of recognition. That place where we are reminded of all that God has forgiven us for. When we fully recognise ourselves and can then see the mercy, grace and forgiveness that we have received from God we are given the strength through the Spirit to offer the same grace and forgiveness to others. Mercy begets mercy. Love begets love. Compassion begets compassion and forgiveness begets forgiveness. All these things are the opposites of the norm where violence begets violence, hate begets hate and fear begets fear. Instead of a viscous cycle of retaliation we are called to a virtuous cycle of reconciliation which seeks to bring wholeness and healing. That wholeness and healing is as much for us as it is for those who have wronged us.

AMEN.