SERMON September 6 Pentecost 15

Once upon a time, a young rabbi was dismayed to find serious division and quarrelling among members of his new congregation. You see, during the Friday evening Shabat service, half of the congregation would stand during one part of the proceedings while the other half remained seated. All semblance of decency and decorum was lost as they shouted at one another to conform to their way. Members of each group insisted that theirs was the correct tradition.

Seeking guidance, the rabbi took a representative from each side to visit the synagogue's founder, a ninety year old rabbi living in a nursing home. "Rabbi, isn't it true that tradition was always with those who stand at this point of the service?" inquired a man from the standing group.

"No, that was not the tradition," the old man replied.

"Then it is true for people to stay seated," said the sitting down representative.

"No," said the old rabbi, "that was not the tradition."

"But rabbi," said the young rabbi, "what we have now is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, while the others sit and scream!"

"Aha," said the old man," THAT was the tradition!"

Just like the rabbi's congregation, conflict has been around in Christian communities since early times. The creed that we recite each week was formulated to sort out the true believers from the heretics, and even in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus feels the need to teach the disciples about how to resolve conflict. Perhaps, given the combination Jesus chose for the Twelve apostles- including a tax collector, a collaborator with the Roman Empire, as well as a zealot, committed to its violent overthrow. Add in two disciples who were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder", presumably a reference to volatile temperaments, and even Peter, stubborn as a rock, it is unsurprising that conflict resolution within the group is needed.

Jesus outlines a process of reconciliation, first deal with one another directly and privately, and only involve a wider group or the community if progress is not made at the first step. Quite often, what we have seen through Church history has been examples of what follows after that third step – exclusion, excommunication, anathematisation, shunning- we seem to have many words to describe that part of the process. At times it seems the process jumps straight to that step.

The context of the teaching also puts it into perspective. The chapter begins with begins with the disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest, and him placing a child in front

of them and saying the greatest is the one who is able to become as humble as a child. Our Gospel then began with the parable of the lost sheep, reminding us that God the shepherd is concerned for the one sheep that goes astray, to the point of impractically leaving the other 99 on the mountain while they seek out the lost sheep. The teaching about conflict resolution is removed from ego based needs to be right or to be compensated, but is rather put into the wider context of restoration of the community.

Care is taken at all times to attempt to restore the relationship. Emphasis is placed on maintaining dignity for both parties. Thus the first stage described in the reading is a private discussion, attempting resolution and restoration of relationship. Then a couple of other people are involved, to provide an independent perspective, an outside view, again so that reconciliation and restoration of the relationship may be achieved. It is only after these have been attempted without success that the community is called upon to arbitrate, and only after that arbitration is ignored, that the offender is to be treated as a gentile and a tax collector. There may come a point where reconciliation is not possible, and separation to avoid further harm is the only solution.

But even should things get to this stage, the door is not closed forever. The offender is to be treated as a Gentile and tax collector. But this is Jesus saying this – and what do we see from his own example in ministry elsewhere in this very Gospel? It is gentiles, a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman, that are declared models of faith when they ask Jesus to heal their beloved. Matthew the tax collector (and traditional author of this Gospel) is called to follow Jesus, becoming one of the twelve, like Peter James and John, (and presumably is in the audience when Jesus says this!) and it is dining with tax collectors and sinners that triggers the Pharisees to criticise Jesus.

Perhaps the challenge here is to keep the door open- that even at times when separation is needed to prevent harm in the current circumstance, that there is always room for future reconciliation, that there is always a reaching out in love, a yearning for grace to enable restoration. In an increasingly polarised community and world, which seems to be ever ready to seek revenge through violence, whether physical or verbal, and writing off those with whom they disagree, a community that teaches a different way of resolving conflict can be a positive influence. If God, through the life, death and resurrection of Christ is able to provide grace to restore our relationship with the source of all love and compassion, are we not called to live out, to strive for that same ministry of grace and reconciliation in our lives, in our life together?