



St Peter's Church, Harborne

Growing in love - Deepening Faith
Working for God - Welcoming all



Sermon 6 September 10.00am

Readings Ezekiel 33 7-11
 Matthew 18 15-20

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen”

Today's Bible passages are challenging because it's a tricky and delicate subject when people do the wrong things or things go wrong between people in church, those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ, part of God's family but I think today's readings are both hopeful and helpful.

The passages have some common aspects even if the context is different. Most importantly, the situations in both Ezekiel and Matthew are clearly set within the context of God's overwhelming love for his people, secondly there is wrongdoing or sin and someone is asked to speak out about, to name the wrongdoing and thirdly people must realise they have done or said something wrong. And the purpose of all this is, I think, is reconciliation, that is the healing and strengthening of the relationship with God but also the healing and strengthening of a relationship with the other members of the family of God.

Let's address wrongdoing and sin first. What's the big deal here? Well we are all made in God's image and created to live in his world. God knows how we are made and has set out how we can best live together and be good stewards of His world. But we are all so very human and we will always get things wrong because we are not perfect.

When we get things wrong there is always a choice. We can either recognise we got it wrong, tell God and seek to make amends or we can carry on believing that it wasn't so bad, it didn't matter or there was a good reason why we did what we did. If it's the latter then what we are doing is thinking we are the ones who need to manage this situation and by not bringing it to God we begin to distance ourselves from Him.



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This is like an open wound that doesn't fully heal. It's a source of pain, it's a hurt that can subtly influence our future actions and interactions with others in an unhelpful, an unhealthy, an unloving way. So it affects us both on a personal level but also in a the wider sense of the church, the family of God. But God, our Father in heaven doesn't want this he wants us to be loving and he is not a God of punishment, but he is a God of unconditional love.

In our first reading, the Lord is asking Ezekiel to tell the people of Israel that if they do wrong, if they turn away from what God suggests they do, if they sin they will die in their own iniquity. What hope then is there for them?

In Ezekiel the people have been told they're doing wrong and their response is to cry out that they have sinned and that they will surely die. This is a human way of understanding that when you've recognised that you've done wrong, punishment is the fairest response. The Israelites believe that their punishment should be death. In his book 'Breathing under water' the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr argues that God's response to sin is very different. He thinks that when human's do wrong, they then expect to be punishment, they then repent and finally are reconciled with God and they are transformed. Rohr says that God thinks differently and when humans do wrong his response is to just keep showing his unconditional love. And if we look a few verses on from the passage in Ezekiel we see that is exactly what the Lord says that if someone turns back to doing what is just and right then none of the sins that he committed shall be remembered against him ... he shall live."

This is the hope for the people of Israel that God's love is so deep and so wide that it can take all the hurts that hurt him, that hurt other people or damage his created world. But God's love goes way above and beyond this, he loves us so much that His abundant love will support us to face the challenges of this life and help us become more Christ-like.



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As we turn to our reading in Matthew, it's helpful to remember that what lies immediately before our passage is the message of the need to be humble like a child and the parable of the lost sheep and that what follows it is Jesus telling Peter that forgiveness is seventy times seven. These tell us that God will go all out to draw us back in to His love, that it doesn't matter how many times we get it wrong his grace, his unconditional love will forgive all that we have done but also that we need to be humble and to have enough self-awareness to act justly and rightly.

In our reading Jesus gives the early church some helpful advice on what to do when things go wrong in church. He knows how much pain this can cause and what disruption it can play in relationships not just between those who are affected but by the unseen ripples of unhappiness and confusion that can affect others.

When things go wrong it can often seem easier not to meet them head on but sweep the situation under the carpet or into a dark corner where it can't be noticed and hope it will all be forgotten. But the danger in this approach is that it can, as I mentioned earlier, act like an open festering wound, never quite going away, causing more pain and possibly becoming more difficult as time goes on. On some occasions it can't even be swept under the carpet because it has become the elephant in the room.

Jesus sets out how to handle the situation. If someone is doing something wrong, something ungodly, then you should speak to them about this. I don't know about any of you but that's never an easy thing to do. It requires tact, diplomacy and sensitivity. Above all it is essential not to be judgemental or to take or even give the impression of taking the moral or spiritual high ground. Earlier in Matthew chapter 7, Jesus says "Judge not that you not be judged" and illustrates those who have a lack of self-awareness with the image of trying to remove a speck from another's eye while there is a beam in their own eye.



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Jesus knows that the one to one approach may not lead to reconciliation. So if that doesn't work then involve a few church members so that the evidence is not just from one person but there are a few people who can say that they've noticed what has been done. And finally if that doesn't work, then involve the rest of the church who can then decide what to do.

The resolution of such cases whatever their nature takes a toll on all those involved. But we never do things on our own. Jesus makes the promise that whatever is happening whether it's a prayer meeting, a PCC meeting or when things have gone wrong, he will be there to help us. That doesn't mean he's going to make it all painlessly better but God's boundless, overflowing love will help us through the pain and discord to grow closer and stronger.

Wherever there are two or three of you who come together in my name, I am with you. Jesus, Emmanuel, 'God with us'. What a wonderful promise to remember and to embrace in all that we face together as we continue to grow as God's people, as God's family in this place.

Amen

Pete Brayshaw

Reader