

Sermon Sunday 7th September 2008

Conflict in the church! Few of us enjoy it. Most of us have a colourful story or two we can tell. A few of us could write a book about things that go on in churches. Having to face conflict can be very difficult. Few of us do it well. There are so many escapes. Some try to stuff their feelings down and not talk about it until the situation gets so bad they explode. Sometimes we use gossip as a weapon - telling everyone we know about the problem except the person concerned. Sometimes we resort to put-downs of the ones we don't like. A person who can confront another, discuss it reasonably, and then leave it alone while staying in relationship, is a rare person indeed.

The issue about conflict is twofold: there is both too much fear and not enough hope. If you are like me, you fear anger, rejection, failure, or the pain of a blow from another. We lack enough hope in others to believe that they will bother see good in us. So we stay away from relationship. A wise teacher once said that to cease to expect anything good from another person was the same as condemning that person to death. To expect nothing good in the other – and therefore to stay out of relationship - is as good as ignoring a pot plant and allowing it to die on the patio.

So in the face of that, today's readings make difficult demands of us. They are asking that we expect to see goodness in those who wrong us – and in those we would rather avoid. Ezekiel sees this as part of the essence of God. His insight is that God is willing to keep waiting until the last minute for us to turn to him. God is willing to value the present moment of righteousness more than any previous moments of wrongdoing. He knows God as one who expects a prophet to never give up, to never cease warning a stubborn and rebellious people. Ezekiel says God is hope. God only sees goodness in us and that means forgiveness is always possible with God. God is always willing to wipe the slate clean and start afresh.

If we think it's hard to get on with some of the people in our church, it has never been any different. S. Paul had blistering arguments with his fellow Apostles. The churches he founded and into which he invested so much of his life often turned and against him. He suffered various forms of character assassination; he was accused of trying to

feather his own nest, of massaging the gospel to suit his own ends, of building up his ego. Some of these fights were about power. Other leaders were trying to undermine Paul's character to build up their own power base with the locals. I don't know how Paul found the stamina to keep going. Most ordinary folk would have given up. But hear Paul's advice: be ambassadors of reconciliation. Be a people who are known for healing and restoring broken relationships. Go about it without proclaiming your rightness or by pointing out the wickedness of the other. The essence of Paul's point of view is to do with communion. The fact is: people we can't stand are loved by God; the Risen One is in relationship with them, loving them into being. If Christ is in communion with them, so are we. That requires we approach them with generous hearts, looking for their goodness and for the love in their hearts that comes from God. Hence the point of Matthew's teaching about being reconciled. If the first attempt fails, we are to try again. The next time we might take a supporter or two. Only on the third try should we involve the whole community of the church. Even then, we still do not give up on reconciliation. We still keep hoping and trusting that there is goodness in the other. Only after all these attempts fail may we treat the other as a gentile (outsider) or tax collector (an outcast). But even then, we must not forget the next passage in Matthew's gospel that follows on immediately from Jesus' teaching today. Peter asks, "How many times must I forgive?" And Jesus answers, "Seventy times seven." God needs bold disciples who will approach difficulty with hope and generosity. We are to be hopeful and generous even to those who wrong us. That is Paul's message today about love. Love supports our patience and creates peace. Love does not give up on the other. Love only expects goodness.

Conflict is no stranger to the church. It is certainly no stranger to this church. We might well be carrying wounds from past conflicts, or from other conflicts we have faced in other aspects of our lives. Sometimes people lie in bed on Sunday morning wondering whether its worth getting out of bed to come to church knowing they will face a personality they find difficult. What can we do to begin the process of healing?

Some people carry around within them an internalised critical voice; a voice that says nothing is right – everything you're doing is poor. The first point to realise is that God is not the critical voice. God sees only good in us. He looks at each of us, and loves

what he sees. He sees his own image reflected back to him. He sees the love in our hearts that comes from himself. So there is spiritual task before us; in our prayer we need to know ourselves as beloved of God. Then we can begin to see goodness in others and build the capacity to forgive.

Forgiveness is not an optional extra in Christianity. It is part of the core of what it means to embody the resurrection in our lives. Recall the first Easter Day when the risen Christ first meets his disciples. The disciples had betrayed Jesus, abandoned him, and denied him. Yet when Jesus meets them again, his first words are, "Peace be with you," words of reconciliation. Jesus came to show us how to break the cycle of human rivalry and retributive violence. He showed us that God is forgiveness. God forgives you and me. If we dare to forgive, God will be with us.

It's a difficult message today for us to get our heads around. I am sure you will be able to think of all lots of problems and objections about this gospel passage. What about the recidivist criminal? What about a murderer? How can we forgive people who commit such terrible crimes? I don't have the answer and I don't know if I could forgive a person who caused me such pain. What is clear is that when God looks at us he sees past our failures and the mess. God sees the wonderful human being that we are. In our prayer we need to ask God to help us see the goodness in others so that we can look upon the ones we dislike with hope. Then we can speak lovingly to our neighbour, we can begin the task of building a relationship of trust and walking the way of forgiveness.