

DEALING WITH AN OFFENDER: 23RD SUNDAY A

Brian Gleeson CP

We have reached a section of Matthew's gospel in which Jesus is doing community-building. At the time Matthew wrote, about the year 80, the Church was on its own. It was no longer a part of the Jewish community and Christians were no longer living like Jews. So they needed guidelines for their life together. Today, speaking through Matthew, Jesus reminds Christians how to sort out their differences. Like Jesus himself they must act with compassion and forgiveness, and with a determination to be fully reconciled and completely at peace.

This leads to the questions: - *What do you and I do when somebody hurts or offends us? Do we keep the hurt to ourselves and brood over our wounds? Or do we approach the offender and say just how we are feeling?*

When somebody hurts or offends us we might tend to respond, *'It's a big world, and life is short. I'll just go my own way and ignore him or her.'* Or else we might deal with our anger by moaning and groaning about that person. In short, we may do anything but speak to the person about what is bugging us.

Unlike our big parishes today, the early Church was a group of very small communities, communities that were surrounded by non-believers. Christians going to church were easily recognised, and so too was how they behaved towards one another. It was like being a family in a small town. Neighbours know quickly when a family is fighting. So it was very important for squabbling Christians to resolve their differences and preserve the unity of their group. For that reason, Matthew draws on the attitudes, example and teachings of Jesus, to put to his community a three-step process for forgiveness, reconciliation and harmony.

At first just two people are involved: *'If your brother or sister sins against you go and have it out with him/her alone.'* Notice that it is the one sinned against who must take the initiative. At this stage the privacy of the two is respected. There are no third parties. The guidelines don't say how the conversation is to go, but the aim is to tell the truth in love, rather than to humiliate the other. It is hoped, then, that the two at loggerheads will speak in a calm and matter-of-fact way about how each has experienced the other.

That's certainly the ideal. But life doesn't always work out in an ideal way. So, if Step One fails, Step Two is to get support for a second approach to the offender. The conversation is to include just one or two more persons, who can act as unbiased witnesses, and help to settle the matter before it goes viral and public.

The instructions of Jesus continue. If the offender is stubborn and still refuses to admit that he/she has done anything wrong, the process moves to another level: *'If he/she refuses to listen [so far], then tell the local church [community]'*. Here Jesus gives the whole community the power *'to bind and loose'*, the power to settle the matter. If the community

establishes that the offender is now truly sorry, it makes peace between the parties. If not, it may discipline the offender, even to the point of excluding him/her from the group, at least for a time. This is because such offenders have shown that their unloving attitudes and behaviour are simply unchristian, and they don't really belong. It's understood all along that the decision of the community is actually the decision of Christ living and acting within his community.

All this is so different from *'my lawyer will talk to your lawyer'* kind of thing. We're living in a society which emphasizes *'three strikes and you're out'* and even *'zero tolerance'*, i.e. *'one strike and you're out'*. But that's not the full picture. Here is one instance of reconciliation and peace at work in a courtroom. It comes from *The New York Times*.

Ryan, aged nineteen, was charged with tossing a turkey through a car windshield. He nearly killed the driver, Victoria, aged forty-four. She suffered severe injuries which required many hours of surgery to rebuild the bones of her shattered face. Ryan pleaded guilty in court. In the adjournment he came face to face with his victim for the first time. He said he was truly sorry and begged her to forgive him. She did just that. She cradled his head as he sobbed. She stroked his face and patted his back. *'It's O.K., it's O.K.'* she said over and over again, *'I just want you to make your life the best it can be.'*

When the case resumed, Victoria took her forgiveness further. She saved Ryan from twenty-five years in gaol, by insisting that the prosecutor offer him a plea bargain instead - six months in gaol and five years probation.

Surely, her forgiveness could hardly have been more generous and more genuine than that! Surely too her forgiveness bears out the truth of what Paul has taught in our Second Reading today: *'Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour'*!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com