

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.  
*Glory to you, o Lord.*

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

18 "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

This is the Gospel of the Lord  
*Praise to you, O Christ*

Lord, take my words and speak through them. Take our thoughts and think through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire with the Holy Spirit. *Amen*

It has been said that Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship. Today's Gospel reading is all about relationships. Relationships with each other and, when conflict enters a relationship, how we deal with it.

During the last days that Jesus was on earth he left us with the most important commandment of all: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul. Following on from this, he commanded us to love our neighbours as ourselves. God created us to be in his image and he created us to be in relationship with him. In fact, St Augustine once said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. I am sure we can all attest to this: when we are good with God, life is smoother, happier and more serene. God wants us to have a happy healthy relationship with him. He yearns to have his children close.

But we are sinners, we are human, and we keep breaking that connection and pulling away. We become distracted with other pursuits and elevate them to level of greater importance than our relationship with God. The way we chose to live is not always aligned with our faith. Have you noticed that when you are not right with God, somehow you are not right with the rest of world either? Nothing else seems to gel, least of all your relationships with others.

On occasion there comes a time in our relationships with each other when we feel like it is just too hard, too much has happened, and we can never reconcile and regain the relationship as it was before. Fortunately for us, God never feels like that. Each one of us is too precious to him, like the shepherd that left his 99 other sheep to go looking for the one that was lost. God is so determined to stay in relationship with us that he sent Jesus to earth to live with us and teach us. Most importantly, he sent Jesus to die for us on the cross, so that we might be forgiven for our part in the breakdown of our relationship with him. This is the gift that God has given us, that by his Grace we may find our way back to him. Like any other relationship, our relationship with God is a two way street. God has given us the gift of grace, our response in return is to have faith in the promises he has made to us. Through his grace and our faith in him, we are saved, and may be reconciled with Him and our relationship restored.

But this is not where it ends. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbours as ourselves. In his time on earth, Jesus called his disciples not only to follow him but to gather together and become a community. In Matthew, he says: For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. It is important to Jesus that we build relationships with one another, care for each other, pray for each other. He wants to us grow in faith and discipleship together. He hopes we can find a way to live in harmony, but he is wise and knows that as sinners, and as human beings, we disagree and argue. We lash out and hurt one another. And being the somewhat self-centred stubborn and proud human beings that we are, we do not always have the skills, or the grace, to let go of the injury and hurt, and reconcile our differences. And this applies here at church, in schools, families, and at work. It applies almost anywhere where people live and work together. Knowing this, Jesus offers us some

guidance, right here in this Gospel reading on how we might deal with this conflict and discord.

In our reading, Jesus lays out steps that we can follow. They sound pretty simple really. And maybe they are simple. I am guessing though that they are not all that easy. After all, it is not easy to take our feelings in hand when we talk to someone who we believe has wronged us. We want them to know how they have hurt us, what the consequences of their actions are and in some cases we want them to suffer in the same way as retribution. It was Desmond Tutu that said that retribution just stands in the way of reconciliation. These simple steps of which Jesus speaks in this passage have a similar approach. The most important element of this process is that it is undertaken with love, care and concern.

The first step is to talk about it quietly and privately. By being able to talk openly, both of you can have an opportunity to purge whatever is at the root of the problem. Through this conversation the hope is that the relationship can be restored. If this does not happen, the next step is for you to ask for help. Involve someone else who can be an objective witness. Again we are working toward healing and reconciliation in a loving and caring way. The third step that Jesus talks about is the most difficult and it is only used when absolutely every other avenue has been exhausted.

The passage talks about regarding the person as a pagan or Gentile or Tax collector. What does that mean, a Gentile or tax collector? Did Jesus himself not spend lots of time with people described as Gentiles and tax collectors and was Matthew himself not a tax collector before becoming a disciple? Jesus does not want us to give up on anyone. Rather he wants us to take action that is necessary for the survival of the community. But he also wants us as a community to continue to share the way back to a right and reconciled relationship with God and with others. This is what he did with many people in the bible who were regarded as sinners. He wanted them to know the grace of God.

Does this process leave you feeling a bit uncomfortable when we think of applying this to our church? It does me. It feels like it is a situation that may be ripe for abuse, control and bullying, and the idea of excluding someone from

our community feels harsh. To that end, I think there are a few of things to keep in mind. Firstly, the vision of a church resonates with Paul's image of the body of Christ. Each member is of great value and no member may be considered superior to any others, or in control of others. It is not an organisation ruled by an autocrat. Rather it is a fellowship of believers united with one another in Jesus Christ. Secondly, Jesus died on the cross that we might be forgiven our sins and our relationship with God might be restored. There is always a way back into the community through repentance and acknowledgement of our sins.

Finally, it is important to return to the last verse: For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. Jesus promises to always be with us, in everything we do. And through prayer and meditation, he will guide us on how to navigate this simple but complex path. He will guide us in justice and in fairness, keeping the needs of all people involved at the heart of resolving conflict and finding reconciliation with love and care. And this promise is not just a doctrine to be believed. It is a relationship that is at centre of our Christianity. There is nothing God wants more than to be in a relationship with us and for us to be in relationship with one another.

Let us pray: Gracious and forgiving Father, as it is in heaven, let it be here on earth. Let us love one another with grace and thanksgiving and let us learn to forgive where necessary and repent without delay. Amen