

## *A merciful, inclusive community*

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*Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 18:10-20*

In a letter to bishops of the Anglican Communion, the Abp of Canterbury has offered further reflections on the Lambeth Conference. He says that the meeting was successful, and that it helped to renew bishops' confidence in their Anglican identity: it allowed every bishop's voice to be heard, and helped to rebuild trust.

Many were surprised by the amount of convergence they had seen. "And there can be no doubt", he wrote, "that practically all present wanted the Communion to stay together". Yet he acknowledged the potential for further division - some bishops would not be able to agree; and he also alluded to the absence of those who had boycotted the Conference: "We were conscious of the absence of many of our colleagues, and wanted to express our sadness that they felt unable to be with us, and our desire to build bridges and restore fellowship".

No doubt, here at St Philip's, you have been aware of, and troubled by, the threat of division within the Anglican Communion in recent times — although perhaps not so aware or troubled as an Anglican from Sydney. It may, therefore, be of some comfort to note that difficulties in relationships within the Christian faith community are not new.

It is widely recognised that much of Matthew's gospel reflects life in such a community in the late first century. And we have just heard a little of that in the gospel reading.

The writer of Matthew's gospel seems to have deliberately constructed his writing to include five blocks of teaching — paralleling the Torah (Jewish Law) with its five books. The first of the teaching blocks, or Discourses, is the Sermon on the Mount (5-7). The fourth is in chapter 18. It is the discourse on life in the Church.

This eloquent discourse itself is a collection of sayings and parables that offer remarkable insight into the conditions and aspirations of Matthew's community. The discourse emphasises virtues extolled by Matthew's gospel. It channels some of the gospel's most pointed teaching on discipleship and human relationships into a community exhortation. One can only guess whether the concentration on care for those on the margin, on dealing with disputes, and on forgiveness reflects some of the actual tensions with the Mathean community.

While the instruction is set within the later Galilean ministry of Jesus, it reflects the conditions and challenges facing the community responsible for the gospel in the late first century — conditions vastly different from the Church today. Nonetheless, the instruction touches on issues of power, conflict, scandal, and pastoral concern that permanently stir in Christian communities, not least in our own times — the recent substantial boycott of Lambeth being a sad example.

The discourse in Matthew 18 falls into two main sections. We have just heard the end of the first and the beginning of the second. Next week we will hear the remainder. The first section begins with a question from the disciples (Who is the greatest...?), which prompts an instruction from Jesus on the way members of the community should live in relation to each other. It deals with the humble attitude that should prevail in the community, especially in relation to care for its more vulnerable members; it end with the parable of the Lost Sheep. The second section sets up a structure for dealing with deviant behaviour, but sets this within the context of unbounded forgiveness, reinforced again by a concluding parable, that of the Unforgiving Servant.

As the Discourse opens with the disciples' query about greatness, in his response Jesus subverts all concern for rank. He brings a child into their midst as a visual aid. In a culture where children were doubtless loved by their families but had no social value or status (excluded from the adult male world as insignificant, as vulnerable), Jesus is making a stark challenge to the will to power that flourishes in any community.

The perspective then changes from one's personal attitude of humility to the kind of consideration for the lowly members of the community that such an attitude would promote. The motivation is profound: Jesus himself is present in the lowly person symbolised by the child

Then, having been warned against harming or destroying other disciples, the community is exhorted to active care and respect. This is done by telling the parable of the Lost Sheep.

We are probably more familiar with this parable in its place in Luke's gospel, where the author has placed it alongside the parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. Matthew does not include those two, but does use the Lost Sheep, though to make a very different point. In Matthew's Gospel it is part of the instruction Jesus is giving to the disciples, where the point is the importance of the individuals and the disciples should be concerned about each individual person. Luke, on the other hand, took the same story and made it a teaching on mercy.

This different usage of the parable by Matthew and Luke makes it clear that a parable of Jesus can say different things in different situations. Originally it described God's great joy over one who was living separate from their people and is now restored. It depicts an action, not just an attitude. It illustrates how God comes at a specific moment, seeking the outsider. When Jesus tells the parable it is clear that this is taking place at the very moment, in his preaching and in his ministry.

Matthew obviously believed that, and would have understood the parable in this sense. But there were situations in his community in which it was no longer sufficient merely to speak of the principle. Among the "little ones" of Jesus there were some who were lost, and no one from the community went out after them. In such situations the parable in its original meaning no longer had anything to say; it may even have supported the community in its inertia. Matthew therefore set it in a totally new context. And it suddenly spoke with a fresh voice. The parable is meant to jar the community as a whole. If God is unwilling to lose a single one, someone in the band of disciples must get up and go after the one going astray. As the framework shows, Matthew did not forget that a disciple can only go after their brother or sister with the necessary love and perseverance because they have learned from Jesus the depth of God's concern for them and for everyone.

It is interesting to pause for a moment to note the significance of the fact that in Matthew's and Luke's gospels this parable is used to make different points. It is worth the pause, especially in the current time in our church. On the surface, the boycott of Lambeth was about issues of sexuality; but a more fundamental issue was the interpretation of scripture. Many who boycotted did so because they said that some others had acted contrary to the clear — and only — meaning of scripture.

Yet we find that towards the end of the first century two evangelists knew that the same oral tradition of Jesus carried the story of the lost sheep, and they both used it, though putting it in different contexts and interpreting it differently. Matthew used it to teach us about ministry, Luke about mercy and forgiveness. It is valuable to see this difference in interpretation. Matthew and Luke didn't call one another unorthodox and say "You can't say that. This story

means this and only this". They both understand that the same story or image can have two meanings — and even more — and we don't have to call the other person a heretic.

Whenever you start using the word 'only' — "it can mean only this" — you start limiting your theology. Keep your options open. Someone might present a third interpretation of the lost sheep story, and it might mean that too. One understanding of a story does not mean it cannot have other interpretations. God will use the divine Word to teach many different things to us. So beware of a theology that keeps saying "only". But unfortunately we know that religious people — and especially religious leaders - have a great liking for the word 'only'.

The problem is exacerbated when one refuses to sit down with the other. The instruction to the Church that Matthew has drawn together here, in chapter 18, now moves to consider how to deal with misconduct within the Church. On the one hand the community must be a place where forgiveness is at a premium. On the other hand, the Church is committed to practising the "surpassing righteousness" of the kingdom. To deal with this issue the gospel provides a carefully gradated structure of communal correction, which has close parallels in the Judaism of the time and strong biblical roots. The steps were designed to preserve the errant brother or sister as far as possible from public shame. What also emerges from the passage is an intense sense of the value Christian community life and interaction have in the sight of God. None of it suggests refusal to sit down with the other. In fact, just the opposite!

Matthew notes the course of action that must be followed if someone offends a fellow Christian. But what is prescribed is not a disciplinary procedure within an organisation. It is within the family that injury has been done, and it is within the family that reconciliation must take place.

The memory has not been lost of all that Jesus taught about the intimate family relationship of those who trust and follow him. Those who walk the way of Jesus together are kith and kin. Schism in the Church will always be much more serious than organisational breakdown. That is why the instructions here in Matthew 18 emphasise the need to make every effort to restore people to reconciled relationships in the community.

The message of the gospel retains its powerful relevance for us as we hear again it affirm for us that God's presence is found in a merciful, inclusive community committed to reconciliation and forgiveness.