

Sunday 10th September Wrongdoers in the body

Ezekiel 33: 7-11: Prophet's commission to warn the Israelites of their wrongdoings – so that they may turn: I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked might turn from their ways and live

Psalm 119: 33-40: Teach me O Lord the way of your statutes – I long for your commandments

Romans 13: 8-14: Importance of love: Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light

Matthew 18: 15-20: How to deal with people who wrong the body – whatever you bond on earth will be bound in heaven...Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I

It's the oddest thing: we spend so much time in church talking about love and being good to one another and behaving ethically and yet some of the worst quarrels, some of the most unpleasant white-anting and back-stabbing, some of the most vicious judging, some of the most dishonest frauds seem to happen in church circles! And it's not just now – it has always been the case.

I think it's because the stakes are so high – our little battles here are mirrors of the cosmic battles between good and evil and the battles that we win and lose here are won and lost in the cosmic arena – the devil has a vested interest in encouraging us to be as bad as possible, to betray the great gift of life and joy that we have been given in the relationship with God. And the closer we get, the higher the stakes and the greater the tempting and it all hinges on relationships. If you look at the Law as it is prescribed in the Torah for a start, we find that all the rules are designed to help us to love God more and to love our neighbour properly and to help us mend relationships that have gone awry.

And for all that the Old Testament particularly and religion generally is accused of being full of judgement and the wrath of God, yet the more carefully we read the Bible the more we discover that it is all about second chances. Long before Christ came to offer the definitive second chance – to make redemption tangible on earth, the prophets were already showing us how much God loves us and how he longs for us to change our ways and come to him.

Because the first premise is that there is evil in the world – we experience that in our own lives and in world history and evil is death-dealing. It is not God who brings us death, but it is our choice of actions that lead us out of the circle of the life that God gives. God's position is clear in Ezekiel's words: 'As I live', says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from their ways and live.' (Ezekiel 33: 10)

Paul in his letter to the Romans describes evil in terms of the sort of actions that give it house room: 'revelling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy.' In other letters he has strings of other lists but this one here is representative enough! You can see how these would come to damage relationships, to break love - with ourselves (hangovers for a start...!), with our community, with God. And he calls on us to put aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light – to get ready for salvation and living the kingdom life.

So the next premise is that sin isn't just private – it will inevitably have an impact on our relationships, on our community. There is no such thing as a completely private action because even if it only affects us, in the way that it changes us it will change our relationships and therefore impact on our community.

That is why Ezekiel so emphasises the importance of speaking out about wrong-doing. If we see a wrong and ignore it, then we are complicit in that wrong: 'If I (God) say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand'.

So there is a responsibility for us as community to for the sake of the individual and the community to say when there is sin – and my goodness this has caused problems through the ages! How much venom has been shared in the name of love!! How much judgement has been delivered to inflate our pride! This is dangerous territory.

And this is where the guidance of Jesus is so valuable. It is one of the rare occasions where he is absolutely specific about how things should be done and that is a measure of the importance of this whole area, so it is worth noticing and making his advice the rule for our way of dealing with conflict.

First – no doormats! We don't collude with evil by allowing someone else to sin against us. On the contrary – 'when another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault' (and this is the crux 'when the two of you are alone.' You don't go simmering in a corner, cooking up resentment on your own, you don't go into a little gossipy huddle criticising the person to someone else, you don't go rushing off and raising up factions to back you up, you go to the actual person and explain how they have wronged you. Honesty is the key. It is very difficult to do this very often. And how we do it is very important. This is where we say – You know I really felt put down when you said... or it's funny how when you do that, it always makes me feel... Not accusing or name-calling or judging, but simply saying what the impact of the action has on you. That gives the other person space to consider, to see what the effect of their action is, to apologise perhaps.

It is probably wise to pause before you do go so that you can damp down the immediate rage and you can be polite. Maybe even try and understand why the person has done what they have done. What we might call sin against us could easily have an explanation that makes it not quite so sinful. So, there is always a balance between confrontation and understanding and how much more constructive it is if the matter can be sorted out quietly between the two of you before it has hardened into a quarrel. As Jesus says: 'If the member listens to you, you have regained that one' – you have followed God's will that 'the wicked should turn back from their evil ways and live' – that there is a second chance.

That is why there are occasions when two heads are better than one. Especially when the person has clearly not listened. That is when you get one or two people to come with you so you can talk the matter over again – not ganging up, still quiet, but someone else there to make sure all is fair and open. There is a value in witnesses because nothing can be twisted. If this also fails, only then does the matter become public and it is laid in front of the church for their arbitration.

Do you notice how in all this, it stops being just your problem? Often the victim is the worst person to decide on the punishment for the perpetrator because there cannot be objectivity. There cannot be the deep knowledge and understanding of motives and reasons which might well make the action look different to how you experienced it. But in all this, evil can still not be allowed to continue. So it is that if a person cannot change, comeback, then they are left outside the community – treated like a Gentile or a tax collector – someone who is outside the circle of love that binds the community of believers together. Someone still treated with courtesy, someone whom you might still do business with, but someone outside the intimacy of friends. Outside where they can do no further harm to the community.

This is the balance we are called to strike in the recognition that evil is real, that it cannot be allowed to seep into a community and undermine it, but that the person harbouring it is still treated with fairness by the community.

And so it is that if two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus himself will be present. It's funny how we tend to think of that as a way of consoling ourselves when only a handful turn up to worship but it is actually set in the context of sorting out a quarrel – how could it be more worldly – and yet there Jesus is – there is grace in the most mundane of circumstances, and there is a reminder that even our most mundane actions are of huge importance in the values of the Kingdom. Let us strive to be worthy of that!