

Revd Dr Lisa Cornwell

Sunday 6th September 2020

St John the Baptist, Crowthorne

10 am: Holy Communion

Year A

13th after Trinity/ Proper 18

Theme: Building Bridges

Readings: Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Once upon a time, there were two brothers. Their father had a large farm and when he became too old to work, he called his sons to him. "I am too old to work anymore," he said. "I will divide my farm in half and give each of you one half. I know that you will always work together and will be good friends."

When the brothers first started farming on their adjoining farms, they were the best of friends and would share everything together. Then, one day there was an argument between them and they stopped speaking to one another. For many years, not a word was spoken between them.

One day, one of the brothers was at his house when a carpenter came to his door and asked, "Do you have any work that I can do?" The brother thought for a moment and

then replied, "I would like for you to build a fence on my property. Build it down near the stream there that separates my farm from my brother's. I don't want to see my brother anymore and I would like you to build a high fence there please. I'm going into town and I'll be back this evening."

When he returned that evening, he was shocked to see that the carpenter had not followed his instructions. Instead of building a high fence there, he had built a bridge over the stream. The man walked down to take a look at the bridge, and as he did, his brother walked toward him from the other side. His brother said, "After all the terrible things I've done to you over the years, I can't believe that you would build a bridge and welcome me back." He reached out to his brother and gave him a big hug. The brother then walked back up to his farmhouse to talk to the carpenter. "Can you stay?" he asked. "I have more work for you to do." The carpenter answered, "I'm sorry but I can't stay. I have to go, for I have many other bridges to build."

Sometimes we have disagreements with people – family, friends or with fellow Christians. When that happens, we often build a fence between ourselves and them. We stop talking to them. We don't want to see them. We use the tactic of avoidance. Like the story, sometimes the fences and walls are not just metaphorical. We rejoiced when the Berlin wall came down. But that wasn't the end of the walls; one sprung up between Israel and Palestine and Donald Trump has now begun his wall building project along the border with Mexico.

The Christian church is called to be an example for the rest of the world. If we start building barriers, then we can't complain about divisions in our communities and between different nations. In our gospel reading, Jesus recognises that conflict happens and sets out strategy for dealing with it. He certainly doesn't advocate avoidance. Instead of fences, he wants us to build a bridge of love between us.

This passage is not a mandate for Christians to challenge individuals outside of the church about their behaviour. Jesus' instructions concern Christians within the believing community. It is about conflict within the church. As committed believers, we have a duty to act in love and respect for God and for one another. The two great commandments, "love God" and "love your neighbour as yourself" lie at the heart of it. Love and stemming from this, forgiveness, are two Christian fundamentals in our dealings with others. I think it is significant that this passage is sandwiched between Jesus' teaching on the value of each individual in the parable of the lost sheep on the one side and the parable of the unforgiving debtor on the other. Any challenge to another Christian about their words or actions should be born out of love.

Note that the focus is personal - the wording is "if another member of the church sins against *you*". It doesn't refer to sinning in general or speaking out on another's behalf. It is about an individual being personally wronged by someone else. Jesus' strategy for dealing with the situation aims to keep it that way as well. He wants to nip it in the bud at the initial stage. At this level it entails a private conversation. The first thing we should do is speak directly but sensitively to the person concerned. It is not in our British nature to confront others but communication is key. There is no need to involve anyone else at this point and it is hoped that the two can resolve the issue discretely between themselves.

If this fails, then permission is given to call in one or two witnesses to act as referees. If the guilty party is still unrepentant, then and only then should it be taken to the wider church for them to adjudicate. The church's decisions should be based on discerning God's word and will on the matter. Finally, if the person refuses to listen to the church then the judgement is harsh... "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, make them an outcast.

That is quite an authority that has been given to the body of Christ. But with rights comes responsibility. It is divine wisdom that is to be sought not our own. Jesus

words “if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” are not a magic formula which force God to answer. It makes the assumption that the two have met as believers and made requests in line with God’s will. Christ, by his Spirit, is present with those who are genuinely seeking to understand his mind and will.

This passage is encouraging right relationships in the church. Jesus desires the reconciliation of those who disagree, so the church community can live in harmony. If left unchecked, a small disagreement can escalate into open feuding that is unworthy of the church of Christ. Coronavirus has been a sobering wake up call for people to drop their differences and come together, albeit socially distanced, in adversity. “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep” urges Paul. It is God’s desire that we should live together in peace and unity. May we be bridge builders instead of fence makers. Amen.