

## **An opportunity for God's grace to flow**

*Jesus said to the disciples: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. 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. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18, 15-20)*

I met recently with a small group of people who were concerned about the health of their Church because of a difference of opinions within the congregation about styles of worship.

The group who came to see me were able, professional people with busy jobs and active lives. What struck me was how deeply troubled they were by the conflict and how it was impacting on every area of their lives. They were really unhappy.

It's not hard to see why. As Christians our relationship with Jesus is everything to us. It is our local church that connects us with Jesus and with each other and so sustains and upholds every other area of our life. If our church life goes wrong, it stands to reason that every part of our lives will be impacted.

Which is why the words that Jesus speaks to his followers in Matthew, Chapter 18 matter so very much. Jesus knows that Church he is founding is made up of sinners. He knows that conflict will inevitably be a part of its life. So he gives really good down to earth advice on how we should deal with it.

First, talk to the person with whom you have the disagreement. I am amazed at the number of conflicts in local churches where the two parties have never quite got round to talking to share their differences and seek resolution. And yet the vast majority of conflicts can be solved in that way. So, if you are at odds with a fellow member of your church, go out for a coffee with them and talk. Walk towards the conflict, not away from it. Actively seek peace.

Second, if that doesn't work, draw in witnesses. And these witnesses are not a carefully selected group of people who will take your side. Jesus is not telling his followers to recruit a gang of the like-minded which would split a church in two. The purpose of these wise and impartial witnesses is 'to confirm every word'. In other words it is to ensure that the two parties understand each other. Their role is to seek reconciliation.

Third, if that doesn't work, Jesus says 'tell it to the church'. In other words, make it known to the wider community.

One of the roles undertaken by the Area Deans and Archdeacons in our Diocese is to seek resolution where there is conflict. Sometimes the wider church is required so that there can be peace.

Jesus' fourth piece of advice can appear to be rather harsh. 'If the member refuses to listen to them... let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.' Jesus is clear that there are consequences for a person who at all costs refuses to be reconciled. But at the same time, so much of the ministry of Jesus was aimed at the gentile and the tax collector. These were precisely the people he sought to draw to conversion and new life. No conflict is irreparable. No one can place themselves outside of the orbit of God's mercy and love.

And then, finally, Jesus sings the praise of peace. Human beings are hard-wired for conflict. It's the way we are. So when we can agree, that is a beautiful thing. When we agree, Jesus is with us in a special way. When we agree, anything we ask will be done in His name.

It would be lovely if it were otherwise, but there is no period in the Church's history when there has not been conflict of some sort or another. However if we follow the words of Jesus, even conflict can be an opportunity for God's grace to flow.

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