

Year A Gospel Mt 18.15-18 OS 18 HTK 6 09 2020

On Friday night I ventured out onto High Street at about 7:30 pm on my way to pick up a takeaway meal from my favourite Indian restaurant. What struck me was the almost complete absence of pedestrians and the few that were there scurrying in order to beat the 8:00 pm curfew. There were hardly any cars and much the same applied to them. Those that were on the road were clearly breaking the speed limit to also be home safely by 8

At the restaurant there was one person in front of me and one behind. What struck me as I transacted the purchase was the almost complete absence of conversation. There were the normal greetings, thank yous and goodbyes but little else. No real acknowledgement, not, how are you? how are things going? It was as though the process was all that was important, and we had little time to waste. I thought about this a bit later and realised how as part of the lockdown procedure, our conversations have also become as it were "locked down". Like you, I'm locked inside my house from 8:00 o'clock until after breakfast. The only face to face conversation I have is with my friend Jennifer, the phone rarely rings and the only contact with the outside world in these hours is by Skype or FaceTime talking to friends or relatives from whom we are separated.

It's in that context that I began to think about today's gospel. A gospel in which Jesus talks about how we in the church should deal with each other, particularly when we are under pressure or come into conflict. Now church conflict is nothing new, sometimes people think there should be no conflict in church as though by virtue of being Christians we can and should cover all our disagreements with

niceness. Jesus in today's gospel seems to proceed on the assumption that the conflict in a Christian community is nothing but normal and natural and should be dealt with honestly and with compassion. But as we all know honesty and compassion are all too rarely the watchwords of church conflicts. Many times, anger, hurt feelings and lack of clear communication drives us towards either sweeping everything under the rug to keep the peace, or openly entrenched hostile positions that lead to explosions and people leaving the church permanently. The result is that we may well appear pristine on the outside but are riddled with dissent and resentment on the inside. This was certainly the case when the whole question of the ordination of women to the priesthood became the number one priority for many.

Jesus provides us with another way in today's gospel. First, he asks us to use direct and respectful communication if we're struggling with something a church member has said or done. And not to talk behind his or her back, nor to stage a dramatic public confrontation but rather to take time aside after the initial rush of emotion has subsided and talk calmly with that person. The problem today is that we hardly see each other. For months now we've suffered from the government-imposed lock down. Certainly, since late February there has been little face to face contact among the people of God in this parish and maybe that's part of the issue. For when we are unable to see each other we tend to communicate by the far more impersonal means of letters, texts, emails or voice mails or perhaps Skype or FaceTime.

In other words, we've been reduced to that telegram form of communication that I mentioned at the outset. But these electronic forms of communication can sometimes be quite misleading. For we

often can understand better what someone is saying to us as much as by what their face tells us. Even today when we pass each other in the street the very presence of our masks sometimes doesn't even enable us to recognise familiar faces that otherwise we would stop and chat to.

Earlier in the week I was reading an extract from C S Lewis, as I do each day, in the context of saying my Daily Office. He raised the whole issue of the forgiveness of sins which to my mind is at the heart of everything that Jesus says in today's gospel reading.

Lewis has this to say:

“We repeat a great many things in church (and out of church too) without thinking of what we're saying. For instance we say in the Creed I believe in the forgiveness of sins. I've been saying it for several years before I asked myself why it was in the Creed. At first sight it seemed hardly worth putting in. “If one is a Christian”, I thought, “of course one believes in the forgiveness of sins. It goes without saying.” But the people who compiled the Creed apparently thought that this was a part of our belief which we needed to be reminded of every time we went to church and I began to see that as far as I'm concerned they were right. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not nearly as easy as I thought. Real belief is in it is the sort of thing that very easily ships away if we don't keep polishing it up. “

Of course, the compilers of the Creed were following the example of the words of Jesus himself in the Lord's prayer, where we say each time “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Lewis makes clear there is all the difference in the world between

asking God to forgive us and asking God to excuse us. For forgiveness says, “Yes you've done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says, “I see you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame.” The trouble is what we call “asking God's forgiveness” very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses.

In the midst of our unprecedented pandemic we are often far too prone to make excuses rather to seek true forgiveness. Again for Lewis, real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is leftover without any excuse, after all allowances have been made and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness and malice and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the person who has done it. That, and only that is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.

But when it comes to a question about forgiving other people it is partly the same and partly different. It is the same because here also forgiveness does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think it does. They think that if you asked them to forgive someone who was cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out there was really no cheating or bullying. But if that were so there would be nothing to forgive. The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God's forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people's we do not accept them easily enough.

There is the well-known saying that “to err is human but to forgive is divine” (Alexander Pope). As followers of Jesus we are called to forgive others, not excuse, so that God in turn will forgive us.