

Reflection Sunday 6th September 2020: Matthew 18: 15-20

The Cooksey household have just got back from a last minute cheap and cheerful caravan holiday in Devon. We had a lovely holiday, although it would have been improved if we had managed to get a bit more sleep. As I'm sure you all know caravans basically have no sound proofing whatsoever and unfortunately, we had noisy neighbours. One night, during the middle of the night, said noisy neighbours had a massive fight after a little bit too much to drink. They were shouting and screaming at each other – it was a mess. It wasn't altogether clear what the argument was about, but by the way that it escalated so quickly, it was clear that something had been bubbling up under the surface for quite some time...

I'm sure that this is a familiar story for most families – I don't think any family is argument free and more often than not these arguments could be prevented with perhaps a little less alcohol and a little more honesty with one another.

And I must admit that when I saw the Gospel reading for today, it did make me sigh with relief because it is evident that even the early church had difficulties with disputes too. I know that's probably quite a selfish thing to say, but it does make me feel better to know that we are not alone. Even Jesus it seems had trouble with church members quarrelling! After all – you don't write guidelines when something is working perfectly, only when things are going wrong do you write guidelines to steer people in the right direction. From my own experience, in lots of different churches, it doesn't matter what church you are a part of – there is always some level of disagreement. In some churches, that can be smaller things just bubbling under the surface, or it might be that two people haven't spoken to each other for thirty years to pretty much full on arguments on the scale of world war III!!

As a minister in the church – it can often leave you feeling guilty when there isn't harmony in your flock, you worry whether you could have done more to help and you worry about how the church is portrayed to the community around you. I'm sure that most of us have heard the phrase: "And you lot are supposed to be Christians" or "I'm not joining with you Christians – you lot are the worst" or something along the lines of Christians not setting a very good example.

But from the reading today, there has clearly never been a perfect, harmonious Christian community... There will always be disagreements because we are human beings. In some ways, having disagreements within the church community when discussing things like mission and ministry within the community is a healthy thing because it shows that people care, and they are passionate about what they believe in. There is a common misconception that all Christians must be nice – all the time – they must be smiling, helpful and kind 24/7 – but the reality is that life isn't like that. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind or give out tough love. One of my tutors whilst I was studying at theological college used to call it 'the dodgy Christian theology of nice-ness'. From the reading today, I think Jesus understood that and knew that there are always going to be times when life is tough and when we will disagree with each other. Jesus wasn't asking us to have a dodgy theology of nice-ness, but to be real and to try to deal with issues fairly and with respect, rather than just sweeping them under the carpet or ignoring stuff until it becomes a real issue.

The important thing to acknowledge here is that there will always be disagreements, but the way that we handle them and respect ourselves and others is what we really need to focus on. This reading is therefore giving us guidelines in how to handle small disagreements, so that they don't run into massive issues and arguments. This reading is asking us to have those quiet words with people, to try to stop things from getting out of hand and escalating into the world war III type of disputes. Obviously having a quiet word with someone needs to be handled carefully, words need to be respectful and tactful. And having a quiet word with someone is not always easy to do – it takes courage and honesty to stand up to someone to state that something is wrong. It's not easy when you know that alerting someone to their faults might be quite a painful experience for both of you. But that has got to be better than the pain and suffering that a full-blown argument would cause.

The Romans reading from today also carries on this theme. The reading reminds us of the ten commandments – the rules that were put in place to ensure a harmonious life living within a community. But as Jesus said – the greatest of these commandments is to love your neighbour as yourself. Out of love we often let things bottle up and put up with things that we feel are unacceptable. Out of love we grit our teeth and just keep quiet to keep the peace. But the most loving thing that we can do is be open and honest about our feelings to others. We need to demonstrate love by being honest with those that we love so that things don't escalate to something much worse.

Not only that but if we keep quiet, then we are complicit – if we keep quiet then we are saying that someone's actions or words are acceptable. Being quiet about something is being complicit not only to those that we love but also in situations of social injustice.

One of my favourite quotes about complicity is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and a great theologian, who fervently spoke out against the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Bonhoeffer became a member of the German resistance and was imprisoned. Bonhoeffer was eventually executed for his links to the German resistance who were responsible for an assassination attempt on Hitler. This is the quote from Bonhoeffer:

“Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak, is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Nowadays we luckily don't face the type of evil that Bonhoeffer was facing but I do believe that to show love we do need to stand up for what is right – whether that is to our friends, our family, our neighbour or on a bigger scale about an injustice in this world. Whether that standing up is to have a quiet word with a loved one to stop something from escalating or whether that is to stand up to a global organisation or a political leader – it's the only way that we should love.

Amen.