

Matthew 18:15-20. Romans 13:8-end

Sermon 6th September 2020 by Sharon

Christ Church Oakworth and St. John's Newsholme

*Lord, let us hear your word,
to grow closer as one body,
in our belief in you,
ever present in our lives. Amen*

SIN! My initial thought when I heard Philip's sermon last week, beginning with that wonderful word 'love', I thought, that's great that is, the part I get for next week is about sin in the church, thanks God, or whoever sorted out the rota!

It is a typical reaction from me, showing my initial response when faced with a challenge! Being a Christian certainly gives us a deeper insight into how our own weaknesses, rigid mindsets, backgrounds, as well as our own strengths do reflect how we react when something, or someone, challenges us.

All this comes into play especially when we have been offended, hurt or wronged by someone from our church. But as I learn, time and time again, God gets involved and leads the way.

Any commitment to reflecting upon our bible scriptures, and especially to adhering to Jesus' discipline that he has for us, *will* reveal miraculous and wonderful but challenging things! Whether about love or sin! The bible tackles both extensively. It certainly does not sweep sin under the rug. We all know that humans have done so, even in churches. This whole chapter in Matthew, uses the words and teachings of Jesus, our inspiration and guide, on how to deal with the conflicts and challenges we have with one another. Matthew is hoping that this way will give the sinner a chance for repentance without the public naming and shaming. Then we gain our brother or sister back. Only if they refuse to listen, or repent should it involve a few more, trusted people to listen to both sides. If it is something that cannot be resolved, then separation but still holding out hope of future reconciliation. Some sin though involves inevitably a separation that cannot be reconciled.

He reminds us that we are to strive to do it with love, forgiveness and be disciplined in repentance, and with a hope of that reconciliation. Just as God hopes to reconcile us to him.

Our reading today is sandwiched between being reminded that we are referred to as 'little ones' who are to strive to become humble; we are not to be the cause of another, who trusts in Jesus, to stumble or to fall into sin. Saying that 'It would be better for you to have a large millstone around your neck' than to allow that.

We have learnt in this chapter about how the shepherd will go all out to gain and reconcile with even the one lost sheep. Next week's gospel reading reminds us about the challenges of forgiveness.

Years ago, I had shared a post on social media which mocked the then Prime Minister. Someone from our congregation commented how appalling the language was and how awful to treat a person this way. My immediate reaction was to become defensive and put up all those excuses I could think of that made me right to share it, behind the person's back of course, pointing out how they were only disagreeing due to their own bias and inability to see the suffering that I had deemed was directly caused by the direct policies of the government!

I had in fact began to put words into my fellow Christian's mouth and decided to spend time on an emotional over the top presumptuous rant that made me feel worse about myself, as well as what had been getting to me emotionally, which of course solved absolutely nothing in the process!

All that achieves is building up pent up thoughts about another, hidden away, plus guilt when we then next gather, in Christ's name! It was never going to grow our honest and trusting relationship further, so that we could learn how to disagree well together like any brother or sister. It certainly did absolutely nothing in the fight against poverty and struggle that I had so passionately and emotionally deemed this post was somehow doing! I would not have sent that to the MP or shared it anywhere else. I certainly wouldn't have shared it on the church notice board!

Luckily (for me) it didn't turn out to be a 'pile on' of opinions for, or against, or escalate into reems of just arguing for the sake of it! The fact is that the post I copied and shared was full of the foulest language.

I had got it wrong about how to go about things! I had let my guard down and joined in with other like-minded people who fit into my own bias politically and let that overshadow my discipline as a part of our body of church.

It is not good for a representative, a sister in Christ, a part that makes up a whole body of our church to share that! My Christian friend was right.

If non-believers can openly say "well that wasn't very Christian" or "you are all hypocrites you lot" then why shouldn't we expect our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to be able to do the same?

I had, without realising it, began to move away from the discipline of Jesus' teaching. Or the discipline I should be adhering to as a part of our church family.

This member of our church and I are like chalk and cheese in personality, backgrounds, political persuasion but we have had some, what can only be described as miraculous and wonderful experiences where God has worked in our lives.

We have moved over some huge stumbling blocks together. I have learnt so much being a part of a church family on when to agree to disagree, when to draw a line under it. To help others feel listened to just as I have been listened to there.

Who are the people, and what are the circumstances in our church family where you may have experienced something like this? It really does remind us of the journey we are on together and the responsibility we have for one another. If one part of the body suffers in mind, body or spirit, then it affects the whole body. Quite a responsibility.

Church family

Christians who attend church services, are given plenty of opportunity and space to reflect upon and challenge our own behaviours and review our discipline, in the context that we are disciples of Jesus. We are taken on a spiritual worship journey that includes, confession, affirmation of our beliefs, the healing powers of Christ's body and blood, prayers to God, hymns. And absolution, forgiveness and a time to share what we call 'the peace', not just peace, but *the* peace, the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness towards one another, is given prominence.

Is it given the same prominence in other aspects of our culture? Or do we see and hear more acceptance to instantly behave in a way that revenge, naming and shaming, gossip and complaining behind people's backs or long held grudges is the way to go? Our culture is geared up to a prominence given for us to think about ourselves, and what we think, compared to what we are striving for if following Jesus.

Is that why it is easier to behave and not show our sin whilst in our sacred space of church together, because even where 2 or 3 are gathered in his name, he is present? But then we go out and fail in our everyday lives outside of church?

Do we forget that Jesus is present with us in all aspects of our lives outside of our sacred space? Would concentrating on that first help us in the way we react to those who ours and other's sin?

Well, I think we all probably can admit that 'yes' we do forget that he is present.

We could be forgiven for that though when comparing the laws of the land, and then adding the commandments that we as Christians are to live by.

One of the worst crimes in breaking the law of the land, if asked, many might say it would be to commit murder as being right up there as the worst, and then maybe they would say lying to the insurance company or receiving a speeding fine being nearer to the bottom of the law breaking!

Compare that to what Matthew chapter 22, verses 37-40 tells us when Jesus is being tested by the Pharisees on Jewish law, and asked what the greatest commandment is, and Jesus replied,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”.

Not an easy thing to adhere to.

Having not been able to gather in our sacred space as one body for so long, has caused us to reflect upon how we, ourselves fit into the body as a whole. Who we have forged brotherly or sisterly relationships with enough that we can draw much needed strength from, to help sustain us during these difficult times. The challenges of how we might do things differently with people, as well as a whole church, when we can all gather again.

To those who are in church, and to those who are worshipping elsewhere. Thank you, brothers and sisters, in Christ Jesus for being family.

As Romans chapter 8, verses 38-39 assures us:

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen