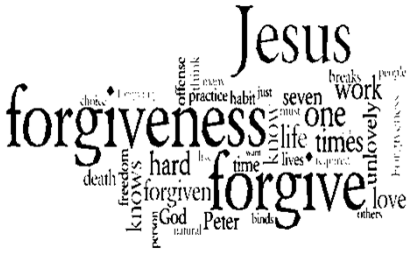


HOMILY – 19TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

Based on St Matthew 18: 15 -20 – Rev'd Dr Geoffrey S Robinson CJ

May I speak in the Name of God, who is Father,
Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.



Perhaps you have heard
the story about a man
who was sailing alone,
and became shipwrecked
on a small desert island.

He had been there for many months, trying his best to survive, hoping that some ship would sail close enough to notice he was there and rescue him.

Eventually the coastguard dropped anchor offshore and launched a boat to check on the island. As the small craft approached land, the man ran down to the beach to greet the rescue party. It was such a joyous occasion. He couldn't believe that he was actually being rescued at last!

As those from the rescue party greeted the man, they also noticed all the buildings that he had constructed on the island. They asked the man, “If you are here all alone, why have you built so many different small shelters along the shore?”

The man responded. “Well, it's been such a long time. I had to keep myself busy. So that building there is where I sleep. That building over there is where I spend my days. That building is where I prepare my food. That building is where I go to church.” - Then, pointing to another building, he said, “And that is where I used to go to church.”

What makes this story slightly humorous is its truthfulness. For as long as God's people have been called together to be the church, they have had the inherent tendency to get frustrated, to separate and to move on from each other. Sometimes, people decide to sever their links with church and never return to the fold.

Today's denominations continue to experience that same anxiety and separation. Often, through the arrogance and pomposity of some of its members; sometimes, because of debates about Christ and faithfulness, about marriage and inclusiveness, about social and other issues, which can and do divide us again as God's people.

Maybe it is a good thing that Jesus has no grandiose illusions about the church, and how people continue to struggle. Jesus knows the challenges we face to stay connected to one another.

He knows the church consists of real people - and real people come with harsh opinions and tensions that can often lead towards alienation.

We often sing hymns about Christian love, but this does not come easily or automatically. We may say that “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,” but it doesn’t take much before we are bickering or dividing ourselves into angry factions.

Indeed, in contemporary life, we see more and more people leaving the church; angry about some issue or worn out by the church's inability to embody the gospel. The church is supposed to be a community of light and hope, of peace and joy for the world; yet we are more often better known, for self-righteousness, judgementalism, and exclusion.

We have much work yet to do as the Body of Christ. Gandhi once said to the Christian community, **“I love your Christ. Where I have trouble, is with Christians.”** Indeed, the church is perceived as too often caught up in divisive institutional issues, in purposes that often do not help make sense of our complex, changing world.

Beyond the church community, we can often see signs of alienation throughout our society.

Absolute certainties seem to have taken centre stage in political life. Compromise is a bad word in a world where technology is increasingly divisive.

We are all so good at divisions and seemingly, really poor at reconciliation and community life.

This is why Jesus' words from St Matthew's Gospel remain so important. We should continue to seek to become the people God made us to be. To keep working at moving from the enmities that separate us from the community that sustains us.

Jesus invites us not to sweep the divisive issues aside. He pleads with us to deal with our anger, our alienation, and rather work for reconciliation.

In today's scripture, Jesus says, go and see the brother or sister with whom there is a breakdown of relationships. Jesus is not just making a suggestion here; His words are really a command. It takes courage for us to face such situations, and we should only do so after prayer, and in the spirit of grace and humility.

It doesn't mean "go with our fingers pointing." It doesn't mean go with righteous indignation. These words of Jesus are written to guide us away from such enmity.

Jesus gives us so many other words about how to live: “love God and love our neighbour”, and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

So a self-righteous or prideful approach does not appeal to Jesus. Rather, Jesus says that we should go with grace, with prayer and humility, and talk through the problem in private.

I wonder when talking of such things, if a particular person comes to mind? One with whom we feel alienated or even angry? This is the hard work of discipleship, seeking to repair the breach in personal relationships; for when it works, it can bring such joy and peace.

I do not have to tell you that when people feel alienated, bad things begin to happen. When people get lost in their own worlds, alienated and separated from each other, enmity seems to multiply. Heartache and harm too often follow. Jesus calls us to be more than that; he calls us to live better lives as his disciples.

Remember that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, he showed mercy and grace to the Gentiles. Relationships may break. Life in community may be less than whole. Nevertheless, no one is beyond God's love and grace.

Now there will always be some extreme cases, when no amount of mitigation will lead to peace and harmony. In such cases, we will have to leave the reconciliation up to God; because God is the God of all reconciliation, love and hope.

Just imagine for a moment, that if we could all really live in this way, it would lead us toward the reign of God. I am not sure that I can follow all these precepts and commands, but what I can say is that I will try... How about you?

Amen.