

**SUNDAY 23A**  
**ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD**  
**2017**

If you ever go to worship in the church of Melanesia do not sit in the back pew. The back pew is reserved for those who have openly sinned. These people are not permitted to receive communion until the priest tells them they can. Only then are they allowed to leave the back pew. I presume they have to make their confession first but I am not sure how the priest determines their readiness to be brought back into the fold. I am also unaware of what constitutes a sin bad enough to require such treatment.

Can you imagine trying to do that here? There would be an outcry. We cannot take the customs of dealing with sin in Melanesia and transport them to New Zealand. Our culture is very

different and it doesn't allow us to treat people in such a way.

2

As we cannot take a custom for dealing with sin from Melanesia and bring it here, neither can we take a custom from Biblical times for dealing with sin and just expect it to work in our society. The Gospel reading about how to treat sinners cannot be taken literally for our context. We just don't work in that way. We have to find other ways of dealing with sin in the Christian community.

I wonder if in fact these customs, both in Melanesia and in the Gospel, are really dealing with moral misdemeanours. I like to draw a distinction between morals and sin. Sin is about our relationship with God. Morals are about our relationship with people.

Certainly our moral life, or lack of it, can cut us off from God, which is sin. I do think the distinction is important. It reminds us that both aspects are important and require our attention. We are required to treat our relationship with God and others seriously.

3

So what do we do about what we perceive to be immorality and/or sin? Who is going to be the judge of it? How do we know which people should be sitting in the back pew, figuratively speaking, of course? For most of us we are not aware of doing anything which deserves such treatment. We may think others do deserve it but we would never say so. It is not our place to make such judgements.

However in the Church community rifts do occur. Relationships do get broken. Both sin and poor

morality are about broken relationships. Somehow we need to find ways to restore these broken relationships if we are to be a Christ-like community.

Although we cannot act exactly as the Gospel suggests we might, there are some principles which we can take with us to help the process of rebuilding broken relationships. There are no laws about how to do this. Even the Gospel doesn't give details because each situation is different. Each situation requires its own process.

4

I suppose the first principle to note is that forgiveness and restoration are to be at the heart of the process. This is what the Gospel is aiming at. How can we restore the relationship which has been broken by the action of another, or by my own action? The actual way of doing it may be different each time. But the end result we should aim for is to restore a broken relationship. If we

are seeking to put down another for the wrong they have done us, if we are seeking revenge, if we want to make sure the other never has contact with us, Then we are not looking for the gospel outcome which is required. Our aim always is to restore broken relationships.

Restoring our broken relationship with God was the prime motivation of Jesus. His death and resurrection are the means by which we are brought back into relationship with God. Our participation in the Eucharist is about maintaining and sometimes restoring our relationship with God. That's why we have a general confession at the beginning of worship, it is not a time to rattle of every individual thing we think we have done wrong. But it is rather us as a community acknowledging that we don't always get things right. And making sure that as we come to the Eucharist we have dealt with that first.

5

And so it is the confession of the community saying that we have not acted in a Christ like way.

Just as our prayer book helps us as a community to deal with our relationship with God, so it also helps us on a personal level to deal with the things we have done which have broken our relationship with people. Sometimes we think forgiveness is just a matter of glossing over the wrong as though it's of little consequence. Let's just forget it and move on. Sometimes the hurt is such that we cannot pretend that it's not as bad as it is. So what does our prayer book tell us about restoring relationships which are broken?

There is a rite in the prayer book called the Reconciliation of a Penitent. It used to be called Private Confession. But Confession is only one aspect of the rite. Its intention is reconciliation and it sets out a process to be followed to bring

reconciliation with God and with others. The process is this.

6

It requires first that the guilty party admits that something wrong has been done. There needs to be an admission of guilt. Then there is a statement of repentance. This is saying sorry for the wrong caused. Then there is a statement about amending one's life. This is saying I will not do it again. If possible there is a requirement to put right what has been done wrong. Only after this process can absolution be given. You see repairing broken relationships, either with God or with other people is no simple matter. It requires admission of guilt, sorrow for what has happened, a promise of amendment of life, and a repair of what has been done. Only then can forgiveness come. Forgive us our sin as we forgive those who sin against us, as the Lord's Prayer says. There is something circular about forgiveness.

7

This process takes seriously the hurts caused by broken relationships. Fixing them is not always easy but attempts must be made. Today's Gospel tells us the same thing. The alienation caused by our actions requires that we find ways to deal with the broken relationship and offer forgiveness.

Another thing the Gospel tells us is that this is to be a face to face encounter. The way to restore a relationship is to talk with the other person about it first and not go behind their backs or to others.

This is of course the basis of the Restorative Justice Programme which many in the church have been involved with. It requires facing up to the issues involved on both sides of the

argument. Sometimes this is not possible because one party may not cooperate. When this happens we are still required to find ways to forgive. If we don't, then we carry around a grudge against another and that becomes as bad as the wrong done to us in the first place.

8

Forgiveness is no easy matter. Yet it lies at the heart of the Gospel. It is the reason for the whole work of Christ. There is a statement in the Rite of Reconciliation which says this;

“All things have been reconciled to God the creator through the life death and resurrection of God's only Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit has been sent among us for the forgiveness of sins”.

Like the Gospel “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Here is the end result of any process of reconciliation. Christ is in the midst of us because we are reconciled to one another and to God. This is community, this is the church, and Christ is with us.