

## Sermon for Sunday 6th September 2020



### RECONCILIATION

Great news for some - the soap opera Eastenders is back next week!! Eastenders like many other so called 'soaps' tend to divide people into two types. Some love them, others hate them! Actually I think there is another type and that is someone who likes or watches one or two faithfully but cannot stand another one. For example are you Eastenders or Corrie? Or Emmerdale or Neighbours? Remember that Australian soap?

I have a soap history; I watched the first episode ever of Coronation Street when I was a little girl and for many years I grew up alongside such favourites as Ena Sharples, Elsie Tanner and Mavis. Then for some unknown reason I stopped regularly watching it and switched to the more perhaps earthy Eastenders. Well I have to say I am not such a regular watcher now - as the continuing never-ending conflict and more and more ghastly plot lines have somewhat driven me away. There never seems to be any sort of long lasting relationship in these series. Yet I guess it wouldn't be a soap if there was!

It is true that the soaps have tackled difficult subjects over the years which mirror certain experiences in peoples' lives. Certain topics which may have been taboo in the past have been aired like domestic violence, child abuse, serious illness, death, you name it; it's happened. We have all held our breath as these things get played out on our tv screens and we may say we don't actually want to see this sort of thing dramatised like this. However, one good thing about soaps is that they also show how the characters deal with these situations; how they approach conflict; how things bubble under the surface until one day a situation explodes. Soaps show life in all its ugliness and even brutality for sure but they also provide a comforting backdrop in the everydayness and ordinariness of life which we can all relate to. Hence their popularity.

Our gospel reading today gives us a text which is also dealing with the realities of life in community, which will run up against various kinds of

conflict quite naturally when people are coming together albeit with a common cause. Jesus in this chapter from Matthew's viewpoint is laying down some ground rules for living in community and very realistically is assuming that those who follow him will wrong one another and face situations of conflict which will seem insurmountable at times.

It's not so much a question of eliminating conflict but how we, as his followers, deal with it. Most of us dislike these situations and will do anything to get round confrontations but sometimes it's not actually healthy to keep doing this and Jesus gives us some advice on how to go about it.

At this point we really need to explore the context of today's reading in Matthew's gospel, chapter 18. Sometimes the lectionary is not helpful in just picking out a few verses and this is one of those times. The text comes just after the disciples have asked Jesus who the greatest is in the kingdom of heaven. In fact over the next few weeks this will be explored further in the lectionary. In answer to their question Jesus places in front of them a little child and says that unless they change and become like children they will never enter the kingdom of heaven and 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me'. He then goes on to talk about the woe which seems to be a word that Matthew likes to use, if any stumbling block is put in their path. The tension is increased further by some extreme examples of hands or feet causing them to stumble, that it would be better for them to cut the offending limb off and throw it away. The same goes for an eye! Then Jesus launches into the story of a shepherd with 100 sheep and the lengths that he will go to to find the one sheep that goes astray along with the rejoicing that will follow the safe return of that one lost. It is immediately after all of this that Jesus then turns immediately to our text today about church relations and how to deal with conflict situations.

So we are advised to see the person one to one and this needs courage; it also needs prayer and humility. There are always two sides and truths which both parties need to recognise, though it isn't always the case that both sides are equally to blame. If that works then it's wonderful. 'you've gained a brother or sister' says Jesus and that really is what it feels like.

Reconciliation can often create a much closer bond than you had in the first place. But if it doesn't work and if after thought and prayer you are still convinced there's a wrong that needs settling, take one or two others with you. This of course, is a reality check on your own judgement. In fact we often do this even before the first one to one meeting. We may feel the need to discuss the issue with trusted others and as long as the discussion is confidential and not used for gossip I see no problem with this as a way of beginning reconciliation. We often need others to point out in love uncomfortable truths or if we are in the right but the person refuses to see it, they help us to know we are not making a mountain out of a snowball.

Lastly if this doesn't work - and this sounds totally ghastly - we are to take it to the wider church community. Now I think Jesus here is probably thinking about referring the unsolved matter to a wider group of wiser people in the church, rather than everyone on a Sunday morning. How to empty your church double quick!! This smaller group then would try to help resolve the matter by their own example of peaceful living, their prayer, wisdom and counselling. And then what if that doesn't work?! Here comes the hard part - Jesus advises that they should be considered as he says like a Gentile or a tax collector; that is as someone who is no longer privileged to be a participant in the community of those called by Jesus. This teaching doesn't seem to fit with his teaching about loving our enemies does it? How then can we be at peace with this?

Well I think the answer is in the context of this chapter which is why I wanted to explore that initially. Jesus does not want any one of his people lost and he will do whatever necessary to rescue the one who is on the outside looking in for whatever reason. This teaching has shown us what Jesus thinks we should do when someone has seriously broken fellowship with another and despite all loving attempts at reconciliation has rejected making peace. Sometimes we have to be tough to be kind and the only way to make someone see they actually have become a stumbling block and so in a sense have already put themselves out of the church community.

The thing is we need to make sure we are not stumbling blocks for others causing others to stumble. Those who Jesus calls 'little ones'. The lost sheep may also be one of our fellow church members and we need to do all we can to bring that person home. Jesus here is giving a lot of authority to his community but it must not be misused because as Jesus says 'when two or three are gathered together in his name he is there in the midst of them'. This is a wonderful promise but don't forget that God sees the innermost truth in our hearts, which is not always life giving. So we need to know our own frailties and elsewhere the bible says if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. But if we remember that, we will be well on the way to confess our own shortcomings, be more able to call on Jesus' name, whatever the cost to our ego and really begin to engage in reconciliation.

Finally, the photograph is of what is now a famous sculpture called *Reconciliation* by sculptor Josefina de Vasconcellos, showing two former enemies embracing each other. It is placed in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. An identical sculpture has been placed on behalf of the people of Coventry in Peace Garden in Hiroshima, Japan. Accompanying wording says 'Both sculptures remind us that in the face of destructive forces, human dignity and love will triumph over disaster and bring nations together in respect and peace.'

This is reconciliation on the large scale and is as we know much needed today. We see the results of not doing it by extremism, terror campaigns, heavy handed oppression by occupying forces. On the smaller scale we see it in broken relationships, shattered families, feuds between neighbours and sadly some divided churches. So I pray let this beautiful sculpture give you hope and courage and practice as Paul writes to the church at Rome, loving our neighbour as ourselves, lay aside any work of darkness, put on the armour of light, indeed put on the Lord Jesus Christ and then I think we can safely say we can do no more knowing that when we come together in his name, Jesus is among us.

Amen.