

23rd Sunday in OT (A)

10th September 2023

‘If your brother does something wrong ...’

Ezek 33: *warn the wicked man* Ps 94: *harden not your hearts*
Rom 13: *love your neighbour as yourself* Mt 18: *winning back your brother*

Looking back, I find that these readings are the ones which greeted me for my first Mass as a priest 24yrs ago in September 1999. And indeed I have preached on these readings every time since (every 3 yrs)! At my first Mass, I remember speaking about the Church as the place where repentance and forgiveness are most at home. It is exactly what today’s readings are all about, and it is also, to a large degree, what priesthood is about.

There is indeed a *richness* in these texts — Ezekiel, St Paul, the Gospel — reminding us that God asks us to be people (i) who keep the commandments; (ii) who urge and assist others to goodness; and (iii) who strive for reconciliation. These aren’t esoteric or far from our daily concerns ... The Scripture here speaks of things that matter every day. Keeping the commandments ourselves, as St Paul says, expresses one’s love of neighbour. Urging others also to be people of goodness, as Ezekiel says, is part of our duty, though not through an attitude of self-

righteousness. And Our Lord in Matthew’s Gospel speaks forcefully of the need to be reconciled early with those we have fallen out with; not to let matters fester and get out of hand. It would be good, this Sunday, particularly, to take your Mass sheet home and to revisit these readings at another point in the week, to savour them, and to pray with them ... What loving action might the Lord be asking of me? What commandment of His might I be failing to keep? Which person in my life do I need His help in reconciliation with? Who might I know that is falling away from Christ, and who needs my prayers and good, steady example of faith? “The Word of God is something alive and active; it cuts more finely than any double-edged sword.” Yes! God’s holy Word in Scripture is meant to challenge, console, and teach us — it’s why we faithfully and solemnly proclaim the readings, psalm and Gospel at every Mass. They are spoken aloud for us to hear and take to heart; but often there’s not the time at Mass to explore their full depths, or to receive all that the Lord wishes to convey. So, make it a practice, especially as we always

print the readings for you, to take them away, pick them up again at home in the week ahead, and see which of His words God uses to speak to your heart in the quiet. It could make all the difference! [St Augustine, the great saint of the 4th/5th c., at a crucial juncture in his search for the truth responded to a providential invitation to “Take and read,” and doing so — picking up and reading the Scripture, St Paul to the Romans — changed his whole life!]

Anyway, what can we make of this morning’s readings in this time that we do have? Ezekiel is being told by God that it is his *duty* as a prophet to tell people when they are in the wrong. St Paul, on the other hand, is telling us that, better than a negative list of forbidden activities is the notion that the commandments are best summed up in the one positive virtue of loving your neighbour. So, which do we do? Do we follow Ezekiel and make sure that we let every wrongdoer know exactly the sins they’re committing? Or do we follow St Paul and love everybody, do them no harm, and let them be? Of

course, we do a bit of both, and have a bad attitude to neither. The love which St Paul challenges us to show our neighbour should be a love which when necessary can encompass warning and rebuke. Love which says ‘just leave alone and happily ignore wrongdoing’ is never true love, much as no parent is going to let a child run around near a cliff edge and not say something. There’s no benefit in saying “Well, if that’s the way you want to live your life then it’s fine by me.” No — when members of our family or friends start disobeying the commandments, it’s really hard, but we’ve *got* to say something at the right moment, to urge them back from the brink. I have found it one of the hardest things in the Christian life to risk a friendship by telling the truth — by expressing aloud or putting on paper one’s belief that a dear one is in the wrong. As a priest it’s even harder, this duty to help people keep to the ‘strait and narrow’ which Christ urges on us. The truth has to be spoken, *as long as it is spoken in love*. There’s no merit in engaging in ‘megaphone diplomacy,’ shouting and hurling harsh rebukes. Look instead at what Jesus suggests

in the Gospel today: the personal touch, taking one's brother, one's friend on one side and quietly telling him. God never shouts thunderous accusations from heaven. He always adopts the personal touch. That's why He sent prophets like Ezekiel, and when not enough people listened to the prophets, He sent His only Son. How *could* God have got more personal in His plea to make us hear what was good for us than to become one of us, to speak face-to-face, quietly taking us on one side to say: "No, there is such a thing as wrongdoing, and my love for you is such that I have to tell you." Jesus was, in part, ignored, but He never stopped loving. Nor should we, even if we are hurt by our friend or a member of our family ignoring our urging them to return to the right path.

The Catholic Church *is* the safeguard of the truth Christ came to teach us: He wants to remain amongst mankind, and to keep telling us to do what He, as God, knows is right for our life — that's why the Church has to exist! She isn't here merely to determine doctrine of right and wrong (although Christ *has* given her His own Spirit to

do just that); but much more importantly, He gives us the Church to be the *place* where we can quietly and personally be taken on one side and each one of us helped slowly to correct our faults. If I can put it like this — a crude analogy — the Church is not only Christ's legislator, judge and jury, but is also, in His name, the 'rehabilitation unit' for sinful humanity ... or, as Pope Francis puts it, the 'field hospital' at the front line in the battlefield of souls.

The Church, yes, is the 'home of reconciliation,' the special place where God and man meet. Some years ago, during one of the African peace negotiations which resolved a long-running civil war — I can't remember which one (Liberia? Mozambique?) — the facilitators from the Catholic *S. Egidio* community, along with the negotiators from each side, met in a lodge in remote Norway, far away from the fracas of the war: it was a place of quiet where the two sides could simply get to know each other. It was the personal touch, rather than any megaphone diplomacy, which resolved the war, and it relied on the charm of that special forest house.

Now the Church is exactly that sort of special place for God and us: a home for reconciliation, a place of charm which God never leaves, and is always ready on personal terms to meet us. Christ is the guarantee of all that, because in Jesus God and man can never be separated. So, in His body the Church, we are always united to God: “*where two or three are gathered in my name,*” Jesus said, “*I shall be there with them.*” Just look at the gifts which God showers on us in Christ to help us be reconciled. One such gift for the Church is the priesthood, and it has to do with reconciliation. The priesthood to which I was ordained 24yrs ago is fundamentally about serving the world, in preaching the full message of the truth (in being “the sentry,” as Ezekiel puts it) but also in giving people access to the great gifts of reconciliation — the sacraments especially of Confession and of the Holy Mass. Nowhere else can you find them but in Christ’s Holy Church, where you can learn the truth for sure, *and* also find forgiveness beyond measure.

As we seek to live in the truth, live a life of holiness, and lead others to know Christ as well, let us devote ourselves to our blessed life in the Church. Here, now, as students, let us learn the life-long lessons of being a devout young Catholic. Let’s be reminded of those three fundamental lessons of today’s powerful Scripture readings: God is asking us to be people (i) who keep the commandments; (ii) who urge and assist others to goodness; and (iii) who strive for reconciliation.

O that today you would listen to His voice.

Harden not your hearts! (Ps 94: 8)