

Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity – 6 September 2020

Collect:

God of constant mercy who sent your Son to save us; remind us of your goodness, increase your grace within us that our thankfulness may grow through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

First Reading - Exodus 12:1-14

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, ²‘This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. ³Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb^[a] for his family, one for each household. ⁴If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. ⁵The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. ⁸That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. ⁹Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire – with the head, legs and internal organs. ¹⁰Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. ¹¹This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover.

¹²‘On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. ¹³The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

¹⁴‘This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance.

Second Reading Romans 13:8-end

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’^[b] ¹⁰Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

¹¹And do this, understanding the present time: the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.^[c]

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵‘If your brother or sister^[b] sins,^[c] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”^[d] ¹⁷If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be^[e] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be^[l] loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.'

Reflection

When I was a teacher, much of my playground duty time was spent sorting out playground disputes. There would be arguments about football, use of the play equipment, toys, snacks and unkind words spoken by one child to another. As any parent or teacher knows, settling such disputes requires immense skill and a finely tuned sense of fairness. If the problem is not settled to the satisfaction of all, the quarrel can linger, festering away so it later re-emerges in a different, more virulent form that can often be far more damaging than the fall-out of the original issue. A series of minor incidents between the same two children, if not properly dealt with, can later lead to the far more damaging accusation of bullying.

Today's Gospel reading is in some ways rather sad. At the Church's very beginnings it speaks of Christians quarrelling and falling out among themselves. The passage concerns not only personal relations, but issues that threaten the integrity of a community. It would be nice to think that Christians above all people could get along with one another and settle any differences amicably. But of course human nature always gets in the way of loving our neighbour, and from the start the Church had to deal with the same human issues as any other group.

What Jesus knows is that quarrels cannot be allowed to fester. It is easy for a disagreement to turn into a long-running feud, with families or groups within a church at war with one another. If there has been wrongdoing, it has to be put right. If there is injury, apologies need to be offered and forgiveness given. If lies have been told, the truth needs to be discovered. So a mechanism is set up to enable things to be dealt with before they get entrenched.

The advice Jesus offers is to attempt first to sort out whatever it is on an individual basis. But that's sometimes just not possible. So at that point the whole Church gets involved. There are second chances, and opportunities to change, but in the end the Church makes a judgement. The important thing is that the dispute is not allowed to spread.

Presenting as a united community was a particularly significant issue for the early Church. The Church would have been under scrutiny which was often hostile. The Roman Empire was very fond of 'clubs' that met for a variety of reasons. Being seen as a 'club' was a way of avoiding drawing too much attention to themselves, but this would be changed if the club was seen as a place of quarrels and disorder. There were those who would like nothing better than to show that churches were places of disorder and hatred. The new religion could not afford to be seen in a bad light.

In all areas of life we have to find ways of bringing disputes and resentments out into the open so that they can be dealt with. We see around us the violence that can ensue if people or nations feel themselves injured and decide to take revenge.

Church communities are invited by Jesus to model a better way. The community gathered with Christ in the midst needs to find a way in which neighbours can love one another. Backing away from conflict and pretending everything is all right is not the way, our reading suggests, however tempting it may be. If the Church is to be a place where people meet Christ, if it is to be a source of hope and joy, if it is to provide a space in which prayers can be uttered and answered, it has to be honest about its disagreements and deal with them in justice and love.

Rev Jenny Ellis

