HOMILY FOR THE 23RD SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

September 6, 2023

Readings*: Ezekiel* 33:7-9; *Romans* 13:8-10; *Matthew* 18:15-20

THEME: FRATERNAL CORRECTION AND RECONCILIATION WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (Matt. 18:15-20)

Today's Gospel and first reading are at odds with the commonly held view that we should mind our own business, and let other people mind theirs; we are only responsible for our own behaviour. It is, of course, true that each of us is responsible for his or her own behaviour. But the Scripture readings today remind us that we have a responsibility for others, one that may, at times, include corrections. However, fraternal correction must be in love if not it will fail to achieve peace and harmony. (2 Cor 5:20-21).

The words of Jesus in the Gospel reading are clear and unambiguous: *'If your brother/sister does something wrong, go and have it out with him/her alone, between your two selves'* (*Mt* 18:15). It is important to note the context in which Jesus is speaking. He is instructing his disciples as a community called to proclaim and witness to God's reign on earth, on how they should behave towards one another. He encourages them to challenge and help one another to live fully Christian lives, lives of integrity and loving service in accordance with God's reign of justice and love. So, when they see that a member of the community is not living in accordance with their Christian calling, they should not speak of that person's failings behind his back – which is what we all tend to do. Rather, they should go directly to the person in question and try to put him on the right path. And they should correct that person with love, not with self-righteous anger – which will most likely have the opposite effect to the one intended.

We have a notable scriptural example of successful fraternal correction in St Paul's *Letter to the Galatians (Gal 2:11-21),* where St. Paul tells us how he confronted and corrected St. Peter over an issue that was at the core of the identity of the early Church, namely the acceptance of gentiles into the Christian community. While Peter had at first embraced the inclusion of gentiles, later, due to pressure from his fellow Jewish Christians, he stopped eating with the gentiles (cf. *Gal* 2:11-21). We know that this confrontation did not break the unity of the early Church nor rupture the bonds of love and respect between Peter and Paul, because it was a correction given in love. And, as St Paul reminds us in the second reading today, *'love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour'(Rom. 13:10).* Indeed, if we do not love the persons we wish to challenge or correct, then we had best not try to correct them at all.

We live in an era where we all tend to think of correcting an erring brother or sister as inappropriate for a liberal and tolerant society. Everyone is simply afraid to call others to order in terms of morality and spiritual right conduct, modesty in dressing, all because of liberty, respecting people's

privacy or fear of being rejected or losing friendship with such persons. We have an exaggerated sense of our personal autonomy and independence of one another. We forget that we are all interdependent and that our lives are inextricably bound up with one another (Rom 14:7).

Jesus invites us to live on the maxim of *I am because we are'*, and in the beautiful expression of St Paul that we all form '*one body'*. For good or ill, our lives have impact on one another. In the words of the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, *'Our echoes roll from soul to soul, and grow forever and forever'.* If we believe this, we are obliged to help one another to grow together to be the best that we can be as a Christian community of witnesses to the reign of God.

Often what inhibits us from speaking the truth in love to a brother or sister is our fear of rejection and conflict. We don't want to take the risk of endangering our relationship with those we love. But a relationship built on the avoidance of all conflict rather than on truth is on a very shaky foundation indeed. There is a healthy conflict that leads to growth just as there is an unhealthy peace that is really another word for indifference. So, instead of tolerating all sorts of unchristian and destructive behaviour, today's gospel challenges us to correct one another in love and with respect, so that the entire Christian community, all members of the Church of Christ, may glorify the wonder and the beauty of God who has made each one of us in his image and who calls us to live as his children.

The procedures that Jesus recommends in effecting reconciliation and fraternal correction leaves us with the message that we should never give up in trying to win over our sister or brother or family member or a fallen parishioner hence we have to go extra mile to talk to an erring brother or sister. Jesus says, 'if your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell him/her their fault between two of you alone' (Matt 18:15). If this initial effort to reconciliation fails, Jesus tells us to go bring respectable two or three persons in the family, church, or community. Then if this fails to achieve reconciliation, then take the matter to the Church, the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:30).

Let us therefore pray for the humility to accept our faults. For the courage to go to the person that offended us and seek reconciliation, this is hard but that is the way of the Saints and Martyrs. We pray for parents, grandparents, teachers, and those who have responsibility of training the young that they may never shrink in the courage to keep correcting them. We pray for peace and unity in family life. None of us is above mistake; we keep striving for perfection. Forgiveness, reconciliation and fraternal correction is at the heart of it.

Lord, your first gift to your disciples after resurrection was the gift of peace, not to be afraid. Help us to forgive one another. Give us the grace to accept corrections among spouse, parishioners, and colleagues. Help us to work towards harmonious co-existence as true children of God (1 Jn 3:2-2). May the harmony that Jesus teaches us today extend to care of creation as our common home by responsible action of working hard to conserve the beauty of creation. Amen.