

Sermon by Sister Margaret Anne for 10am Parish Eucharist St Mary's Barnes 13th Sunday after Trinity 6 September 2020

I begin with a question. What needs to happen when things go wrong, when we or other people make mistakes, when consequently pain or disaster seems to be coming our way? That's the kind of question that our readings for today are grappling with and attempting to provide answers for. "Sin" is a word and concept not very popular in secular culture today. Nevertheless, everyone recognises that things sometimes go wrong; people make mistakes that have consequences. This can be true of individuals, groups, nations or even be true on a global scale. The present global pandemic is serving to highlight some of the things that have gone wrong on a widespread scale, such as social inequality, institutional racism and ecological irresponsibility concerning our planet.

Our two readings provide two distinct but related methods of dealing with situations when things go wrong. The first, from the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 33.7-11) in the Old Testament, highlights that on occasion things can get so bad that God raises up an individual to tell others in no uncertain terms about what is wrong, and what to do about it. Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest. At the beginning of the book we find him in exile in Babylon with some of his fellow Israelites who have been deported from Jerusalem. After receiving an extraordinary vision, in Chapter 3 Ezekiel is commissioned and called by God to speak to his fellow Israelites God's words of judgment, for they have strayed from God's ways. Then 30 Chapters later, in Chapter 33, our reading for today, Ezekiel receives the call once again. This time Ezekiel is explicitly named by God as a sentinel, a watchman. The image is a military one, that of someone stationed high up on the walls of a city, who is to scan the horizon and look out for the enemy approaching, and then warn the people inside the city walls by blowing the trumpet to warn them that the enemy's approach is visible and coming near. The power of this image lies in the fact that it is God who approaches in judgment. It is God's message that there will be consequences for the failings of the people, that Ezekiel sees and hears so clearly. It is clear from our reading today that God's judgement is an aspect of God's love. God does not want the people to go on getting things wrong, rather God longs for the people to amend their ways. And God uses prophetic voices to convey the message. In today's context, such prophetic voices regarding the environment and the wellbeing of our planet have been heard from such people as David Attenborough with his Blue Planet programmes and Greta Thunberg and also the Extinction Rebellion movement. Concerning institutional racism, the Black Lives Matter movement has been recently gaining momentum after acts of violence in America. Prophetic voices always have and always will be heard, and such a role can be extremely costly, even – as with Martin Luther King – unto death.

So, others can point to how we get things wrong by telling us, when the initiative comes from outside us, from other people's prophetic voice. Our reading today from Matthew's gospel (Matthew 18.15-20) is more about what we ourselves should initiate and put into practice when things go wrong. And the context is that of the Church, what the Church needs to do when mistakes are made. The passage comes as part of the fourth of five discourses, or teaching blocks of Jesus' sayings, that make up the structure of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is teaching his disciples. He is telling them what to do if someone within the Church community wrongs them. First of all, the individual who has been wronged should speak to the person who has offended when they are alone together, face to face. If there is no acknowledgment of the wrong done, then the aggrieved individual should take one or two others along, as witnesses. If there is still no acknowledgment of the wrong done, then the matter should be taken to the wider church to adjudicate.

Open truth-telling is at the very heart of this method. Open truth-telling that seeks reconciliation and forgiveness and the restoration of unity. For reconciliation is a gospel imperative. As Christians we are all called to a life of love and forgiveness. This Jesus makes abundantly clear in the verses following on from today's gospel reading. But of course there are times when forgiveness is very difficult. Desmond Tutu, a former Archbishop of Cape Town, wrote a book a few years ago with his daughter called "The Book of Forgiving". The book outlines a fourfold path that it is necessary to travel in order to reach forgiveness:

- 1) Telling the story
- 2) Naming the hurt
- 3) Granting forgiveness
- 4) Renewing or Releasing the Relationship

Some hurts go so deep that we may not achieve reconciliation in this life. But we do need at least to be willing and open to forgive. With open hearts and minds we give an opportunity for the Spirit to work within us. For in the end forgiveness is not of our own making: it is the gift of God.

Jesus' teaching here is not just sound morality but also good psychology, to put it in more modern terms. The English poet and mystic William Blake, who lived from 1757-1827, knew this too, and expressed similar thoughts in his poem entitled: A Poison Tree. The poem was published in Blake's Songs of Experience in 1794:

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veil'd the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

In the extended metaphor of the growth of the tree and its fruit, Blake alludes to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden as recorded in the third chapter of the book of Genesis. The poem wonderfully, albeit starkly, demonstrates the mutual destructiveness of anger and resentment that is allowed inwardly to seethe and not be given the opportunity for open expression and honesty.

In our readings today God reminds us that yes, things go wrong, but that something can be done about it. Prophetic voices can challenge us to better ways of living. And we ourselves can be more alert to those ways in which we can address wrongs and attempt to put them right. It is the task of a life-time. Jesus himself is our model and our guide. He unflinchingly challenged the religious and political leaders of his day for their hypocrisy. But his challenges were always motivated by love. Like Ezekiel before him, he spoke out against the evils of his day because he knew that God longed for people to live lives of truth and compassion. He forgave his persecutors, nailed to and dying on the cross. And in his glorious resurrection, that we celebrate Sunday by Sunday, he was vindicated by God in all that he had said and done in proclaiming a message of love and forgiveness. We have Jesus as our teacher, our friend and our guide. In all our own falterings and failings, may we be encouraged that God in Christ has gone before us, knows our weaknesses, and offers us unlimited opportunities for renewal and grace.