

LIVING IN COMMUNITY – MATT 22: 34 - 45 By Fr. Neale Sommersby.

Our gospel reading this week sees the Jesus answer the last questioning interrogation by the religious authorities:

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Jesus’ response we could say was both typical and not. He begins his response in a rather predictable way:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.”

These words from Deuteronomy 6 would have been familiar to them:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Yet Jesus then goes on to say there is a second commandment – to love your neighbour as you love yourself - a paraphrase of Leviticus 19:18:

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.”

We of course hear this summary of the Law ourselves as its often recited in our communion liturgy, yet most of us fail to realize that what precedes “love your neighbour as you love yourself,” is, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people.”

Additionally, Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Matthew 6 also echoes this:

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Yet it can be a hard thing sometimes to love, let alone forgive your neighbour. One person who understood this was St. Benedict. Benedict of Nursia lived in the late 5th century in Italy and set down a rule for living in community in the last days of the Roman Empire. We Anglicans have a close connection with Benedict, as monastic communities of Benedictines were very influential in pre-Reformation England. St. Benedict was very clear that our spiritual life was to be lived out in community where one could worship God through communal

prayer, scripture recitation (most people could not read back then) and the sacramental life.

In order to do this, part of Benedict's rule was the idea that the monastery (community) you entered would be the monastery in which you died, and to always keep death before you as a solemn reminder of the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Sounds easy, but Benedict knew that living in community is hard – disagreements are bound to happen, other people will annoy you and (surprise!) you will annoy other people.

Thus many a monk or nun have found themselves prevailing towards the human tendency to “cut and run” – to leave the community or relationship and find another one. But Benedict knew that without having resolved your issues with your fellow monks or nuns, invariably these same monks and nuns would go to another monastery and – lo and behold! – have another disagreement with a monk or nun there, usually over similar issues that drove you from the previous monastery.

When this happens, negative history repeats itself, negative behaviour repeats itself and there is no reconciliation or opportunity for spiritual growth and instead you remain spiritually stunted and immature. Of course, we can act pious and holy all we want, but unless we do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, then our faith to use Paul's words is no more than

“a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.”

Sister Joan Chittister a former Benedictine Abbess and fluent commentator of Benedictine Spirituality writes:

“It is so comforting to multiply the practices of the church in our life and so inconvenient to have to meet the responsibilities of the communities in which we live.”

Living in community with other people is hard. If we recall the words from Leviticus 19:

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Neither the author of Leviticus, Jesus, nor St. Benedict said this would be easy – simple perhaps, but not easy. But this morning Jesus reminds us of the need to love our next-door neighbour, whose dog barks incessantly and who won't

do anything about it. To love members of our congregation who don't see things our way, sit in our pew or just plain annoy us. We're called to love our community leaders who don't listen to our concerns; were even called to love the priest whose sermons are too long and who take forever to return our calls. We're called to love them, but it's hard, isn't it?

In each case, what makes it hard is often the pride of our own petty egos and agendas that seek the self, rather than the good of the other. However, being in community means loving God and neighbour – which additionally means letting go of the need for fighting, vengeance and holding grudges. Loving one another is a way of spiritual transformation that calls us into becoming more Christ-like – into becoming spiritual adults. As Sister Joan writes:

“Adulthood is not a matter of becoming completely independent of the people who lay claim to our lives. Adulthood is a matter of being completely open to the insights that come to us from our superiors and our spouses, our children and our friends, so that we can become more than we can even begin to imagine for ourselves.”

Yes, life in community is hard work. Yet holding and bearing grudges prevents us from being the loving people God has shaped us to be. We cannot love God and harbour hatred for the people God loves. We cannot presume that our dislike or even hatred of another person is how God feels about that person. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength only comes with the spiritual gift of humility to love the very people God loves too. Remember, while there are people you know who seem unlovable, there are people who might just feel the same way about you. None of us are lovable all the time.

Yet it is into this reality that grace enters. We are all beautiful people yet when we are at our worst and most unlovable, God comes to us. That radical, undeserved, unmerited love has the power to move our hearts to love our neighbours – even the ones hardest to love. This isn't easy work – Jesus knew that Benedict knew that, and you know it too. But we undertake it, quite imperfectly no doubt, for in doing so we experience grace, mercy and healing in action, not abstraction. For seeking the way of love is the way of the cross through which we find fullness of life in Christ.

The Lord be with you.