

One of the features of the modern world in which we live is the contract of employment. This will provide the terms under which we are expected to perform at our place of work, the duties that are required of us, the remuneration that we may expect. There will be other clauses covering areas such as confidentiality. Then towards the end there are the disciplinary and grievance procedures that are meant to guarantee fairness of treatment. The grievance procedure includes the steps that are open to us if we feel that our employer or fellow employees are treating us unreasonably. The disciplinary procedure provides the employer, among other things, with a mechanism for the removal of an employee without leaving themselves open to legal challenge in a subsequent tribunal.

As we read the opening part of our Gospel reading this morning, this seems to have the air of the disciplinary procedures I have been talking about. ‘If a brother sins against you ...’. First, we are to try to deal with it one to one – keep it local, keep it simple. Then if that fails, involve a couple of others – let them see what you are having to deal with. If all else fails take it to the whole community – if that fails then ‘let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.’ It seems to carry with it the implication of dismissal, removal from the firm – ‘go to your office, clear your desk and don’t come back.’ We’ve done our best with this difficult individual – we don’t have to try any more.

But let us just stay with those words: ‘let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.’ Do they strike a chord with you? I found myself going back to the Gospels. In Mark’s Gospel we read:

¹⁵ And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples--for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." *Mark 2:15-17*

So when I read those words, ‘let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.’, I find myself asking, ‘What was Jesus’ attitude to the tax collector and the sinner?’ This is where the passage we read this morning parts company with the disciplinary procedures of the contemporary employment contract with its mechanisms for clean, trouble free exits.

It is not that sin and wrong doing is not important, it is how Jesus chooses to deal with it. For Jesus, for God, there is no exit, no point at which the love, the compassion stops. You, I, we may all at times turn our back on God but God never turns his back on us. It is from that perspective that I turn to those oft quoted, maybe even over quoted words of Jesus from John’s Gospel:

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:16-17

God so loved the world, God’s purpose is to redeem the world – not the world of beautiful flowers and sunsets, not the world of idealised communities but the world as it is; in all its messiness, its sinfulness, its suffering, its brokenness. God so loved this world of which we are a part. We are to be the ones in whom, through whom that love is shown.

We are to be as Christ, as the one who turns the other cheek, who goes the second mile, who, to the disgust of the polite and the religious, sat at table with the sinner and the tax collector, who accepted the service of the woman who sat at his feet and washed them with her tears of regret and remorse.

And so I go back to our Gospel reading and I see not the disciplinary procedure of a contemporary contract of employment, but rather a call to reconciliation with even the most difficult and obdurate and, even when they are set on rejection of all attempts make peace, the door remains open. That can be difficult, that can be painful. But that is God's way with us. In the coming of his Son, in his birth, his life and ministry, his suffering and death

⁷ (he) emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross. *Phil 2:7-8*

In the passage immediately following on from our Gospel reading, Peter will ask of Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus calls Peter to a fuller more extravagant love.

As ones who have known God's love in Christ, may we be enabled to be instruments of that same healing, reconciling, redeeming love in whatever situation God places us.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen

Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi