



Romans 13.7-14
Matthew 18.15-21
6th September 2020

Let's Talk

ALL AGE TALK: Let's Talk

Walk along Southampton Row, in the Holborn district of London, and you'll pass an impressive, newly restored Edwardian building that has recently become one of the city's most expensive hotels.

Yet, if this building could talk maybe it would whisper to you as you pass by: *I'm not really a hotel at all, at least in 1903 that's not what I was built for. I'm really a church, actually I'm the headquarters of a union of churches.* That's because you'd be walking beside the old Baptist Church House.

The Baptist Union had its offices there up to 1989 when it moved to share Baptist House in Didcot with the BMS.

My one and only visit to old Baptist Church House was in 1987 during my last year in theological college. We were given the guided tour of a building I've never been back to, and now can't afford to enter!!

I remember being in one of the rooms with a marble freeze on the wall (I see from the hotel's website it's now a plush conference come dining room) and we were told that the day before ACAS had used it. ACAS brings conflicting groups together, often from industry, and provides an environment for talks.

I thought then, as I do now, what a great use for a room at Baptist Church House. To offer space to ACAS, so that they, in turn, could help facilitate people from opposing sides to talk to each other.

In this Sunday's gospel we'll hear Jesus encourage us in our churches to keep talking to each other, even if we disagree, to make every effort to

keep the dialogue going.

We've not always been very good at that in church and for all sorts of reasons it can become very complicated. But, as a general and over-riding principle, Jesus says the best place to start when issues arise between us – is to talk, not about each other, but with one other.

SERMON: **The First Page of the Manual**

Minister: Gracious God, we open the bible
and long to receive your word.

**All: Open, we pray, our minds and hearts
to receive that word
with all its comfort and in all its challenge.
Amen.**

This morning's gospel reading belongs firmly in the practical section of any church manual. This is Jesus addressing that down to earth issue about how we might get on with one another.

His teaching sets the ideal, even if our experience of life in any community, including the Church, shows us how challenging it is to live this way.

The last verse of our passage goes: *Where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.* Yet, as one commentator I read has put it, in reality it sometimes feels as if the verse should read: *Where two or three meet in my name...it can be really hard to get along.*

Jesus envisages those moments of tension that inevitably come about in any community, especially ones in which people hold deep convictions. This is first century management conflict and it needs to be learnt and passed on to succeeding communities and generations.

It's so easy when differences arise to go and gossip about them with others rather than address the issue directly with that one with whom we

are at odds. In today's passage Jesus rejects the practise of talking behind other people's backs and says, in effect, deal with the issue where it belongs. Meet the person concerned, have a conversation and keep the dialogue going. Don't let it fester or grow through gratuitous moments of gossip in dark corridors.

As we said earlier, this is a call to talk *with* one another, rather than *about* one another.

And it's page one in the manual. Alas we haven't got the subsequent pages specifically mapped out. Instead this page gives us the ideal in broad brushstrokes. We are now charged, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to apply these ideals to our life in church, community, business and family.

So, ideally, we take from today's passage the notion that this is a community process and it has three stages. In the first there needs to be a conversation between the two people who are at odds. That's private, yet if it remains unresolved the advice is to involve others, just a few, so the discussion becomes 'moderated'. If that doesn't work, then the conflict is taken to the whole congregation.

In reality this is a process which seems to envisage someone being 'wronged' by someone else. Left unattended such a breakdown in relationships could easily lead to splits, recriminations and on-going factions.

And, despite Jesus' teaching here, that happened, even in the relationship between two Early Church giants, Peter and Paul, who clashed theologically with each other. Yet, in the end they did resolve their differences publicly with a special council called at Jerusalem.

Sometimes the issue of the day brings with it so much passion that the only way forward seems division rather than unity. The Church has experienced this time and again over the last twenty centuries. Yet it's interesting to observe how the landscape changes over the years and how issues often seem to either subside or adapt with the passing of time.

The Baptist movement split from other Christians four hundred years ago

because it wanted autonomy from the state in church governance and an understanding of baptism that it thought was more scriptural than that commonly practiced, namely the baptism of believers. Ironic then, that four centuries later, the church in Britain in which the greatest number of people, year on year, currently being baptised as believers is, in fact, the Church of England.

Ecumenism today invites us not to fight the battles of yesterday.

And then, secondly in this morning's passage we have this idea that if the process seems to falter at the congregational stage, treat the one with whom you have a quarrel as a *pagan or tax collector*.

Well, perhaps Matthew's original readers would come away from this passage content with that outcome. It's rather like that opening scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* with all the men dancing as they sing that stirring number entitled *Tradition*. Of course, it is exactly this *Tradition* which will be challenged by just about everyone of Tevye's daughters in the story, and in the end he will have to face the question of what it means to both honour tradition and love his girls when one seems to contradict the other.

And, in the end, might today's passage actually be employing irony here?

If the 'set in stone' tradition is to cast people out and treat them like pagans and tax- collectors, then do it, says Jesus. But wait, let's recall exactly how Jesus treated such people. Didn't he eat with them, didn't he invite them to join his disciples? Indeed, doesn't Matthew have a back story, and perhaps we can guess what it was knowing that the Church has made him the patron saint of Tax Collectors and Accountants.

In the next section of Matthew 18 Jesus tells Peter to forgive his enemies 70x7, in other words to always be ready to hold out the hand of reconciliation.

I was once talking to a lady who had a real issue with a relative. She had tried so many times to mend the divisions. We talked together and, in the end, she said something very wise, I think. It was wonderful practical

theology, although she would never have given it such a grand title, she said: *what I do now is just try to keep the door open*. Isn't that great, and sometimes isn't that all we can do; *just try to keep the door open*.

That premier disciple Peter, did Jesus a grave injustice in denying him. Yet, after the resurrection, one of the New Testament's most profoundly moving moments is as they meet up and, on that beach, watched by the other disciples, Peter is re-instated by the Jesus who went on forgiving. I sometimes wonder if that too would have been Judas' blessing if he hadn't prematurely closed the door.

So, might we just see the irony in today's passage and in hearing Jesus say: *treat them as pagans and tax collectors*, as actually his way of saying, *never give up on people and always keep the door open*.

Lastly this morning, there is a hint here of where we find the *Real Presence* of Jesus.

Christians often use that phrase in relation to communion and the cherished idea of encountering the love, forgiveness and strength of God in bread and wine.

Yet maybe we could also celebrate the Real Presence of Jesus in each other as we gather in his name. For how does today's reading end: *Where two or three meet together in my name, I am there among them*.

I've missed that over recent weeks and months. I've missed those conversations at LunchBreak, Tea at Three or Friday morning coffee when I've sat down with people and in our roaming and random discussions, I've sensed the presence of Jesus. I've missed the Elders' Meetings and the Ministers' gatherings when we've been discussing thorny issues and as, maybe the quietest member of the group speaks, a light dawns among us and a way forward is found – it's the presence of Jesus coming along side us.

Thank God, I've also found it during these days of Pandemic in phone calls and emails and as I've read what members of this congregation have written for the website – precious words of hope, encouragement and

insight – all reminding me that God has not abandoned us, but his Real Presence is among us – where? In each other.

We need to keep these ideals alive, even as we struggle, at times, with the reality of community life.

2020 was to have been a Sabbatical Year for me and, in truth, it got off to a wonderful start as we visited some very fine congregations and I reflected on those three visits in a Blog.

Our final visit before LockDown was to the splendid Methodist community that meets so faithfully at Central Hall, Westminster.

We explored the building after the service and before having lunch there and saw various plaques commemorating that this fine building opposite the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey was chosen in January 1946, just a year after the end of World War Two, to host the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly.

I thought, how wonderfully appropriate that a body, committed to finding a new future based on dialogue rather than violence, should decide to meet in a church.

Jesus said: It's good to talk, so may it be so as we seek to follow his example of leaving the door open. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 17th August 2020