

Matthew 18 v15-20 – 3 Steps to Peace

What was Jesus' last words to his disciples on earth?

They are recorded in John's gospel, chapter 17, which is known as the Great High Priestly Prayer.

John 17

20 “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one

—
23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.

26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

Beautiful words from the Lips of Jesus that tell us what Jesus expects from those who follow him.

Today is another lesson on how to be a disciple.

He expects that we should be One, in complete unity. Verse 21, *“All of them may be One, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”*

This is the standard that Jesus expects and prays for for his Church, that there is complete unity. For if we have this unity, what is the outcome?

Verse 21, That the world might believe that you have sent me.

Mission begins here. It begins in the hearts and the lives of Christ's followers.

We cannot do outreach and mission unless we have unity and harmony in our fellowship. For who wants to belong to a church that is divided and where there is conflict and trouble?

Jesus knew, on the eve of his own death, that if the Kingdom is to grow through the disciples, the hallmark of this kingdom will be the spirit of Christ living in the hearts of his followers.

Jesus was in complete unity with his Father. He was one with his Father. Remember this prayer comes after Gethsemane, where Jesus had shed blood in prayer, where he

wrestled with God's will and he came to a point where he made peace with God and he falls on his knees and prays *your will be done*.

From this point on, Jesus has abandoned himself completely to God's will for his life and God's will is to make peace with the world through Jesus.

The cross is the place of peace making.

The cross is God coming to this world to make peace with us. The cross is God offering to us his palm branch, his healing, his love, his grace.

The cross is the ultimate place of healing and this is to which, as his disciples and followers, we must continually return. In fact it should be a daily reflection, as we considered last week, *those who would be my disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me*.

The way of Jesus is ultimately the way of peace. It is the way of reconciliation; it is the way of true fellowship and unity.

In our reading today, we have what Willie Barclay calls, one of the hardest passages in Matthew's gospel to interpret.

Matthew is attributing to Jesus words that his church is using to fix issues of disunity.

Disunity will happen as long as there are human beings, for by our very nature, there will be disunity, and churches are places where this happens.

Read the gospels and you will see how difficult it was for Jesus to maintain unity, when he had strong characters like Peter, who was always forcing the issue and even had the audacity to take Jesus aside to rebuke Him.

When you have people like Peter, who acts without thinking and who thinks he knows better than the Lord, then there will be trouble; when you have people like James and John, whose chief concern was not about the Kingdom of God on earth, but whether they would sit next to Jesus in the coming Kingdom, then you are going to have trouble; if you have people like Judas, whose concern was not spiritual but material, and who could not see the need for those in poverty, but rather counted every penny, or if you have people like Simon the Zealot who was waiting for a different kingdom than Jesus, then it's going to be a really difficult journey to maintain peace and unity within the fold of believers.

Jesus recognises the challenges that the church of the future will face, and he prays for them, and Matthew's church must have been experiencing issues of disharmony.

So Matthew shares in his gospel how to bring peace to a church fellowship.

He teaches the way of Jesus. Matthew's gospel is full of Jesus being the Prince of Peace.

Jesus had already taught, *blessed are the peace makers for they will be called children of God.*

Remember, on eve of his birth, angels announcing, “*Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests*”. Peace had come to the world through Christ. Remember his teachings about loving your enemies. Remember on the cross, he prayed, “*Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.*”

Jesus' whole life was dedicated to bringing peace and *shalom* into the world. It was his *raison d'etre*. It was his whole ministry.

Remember after his resurrection, he had on his lips one word more than any other...the word *shalom* meaning the deepest of all peace. His greetings were always graced with the word peace.

So, it's important that we remember this and don't simply think that being a peace maker is a nice idea or it's only for some people in the church – no, if we dare to call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ, then we must become more like Christ every day. In our lives, we must receive his Spirit and reveal his character.

Nothing else matters more than this.

Jesus prayed that God' s love would be in them.

This is the Jesus way. It is the way of discipleship.

Any church that wants to take seriously spreading God's kingdom must take seriously this part of Christ's life.

So, Jesus introduces to the church 3 steps about making peace and reconciliation.

Firstly, if a believer hurts you (and notice that we are speaking about someone close to you, someone within the fellowship; we are not speaking about a stranger, but a believer in Christ, someone who professes to know and love God through Jesus Christ) if he or she hurts you, perhaps it's words that cut you to the core or maybe actions and you have felt let down, pained by them, perhaps it's not even words, it's their lack of them and they have ignored you and turned away from you. Then, said Jesus, this is what you should do:

Go, immediately to them, and share with them, and try and work the issue out. Let them know that you are hurt, let them know that there is a problem. Now, this may take a bit of courage, for most people don't like confrontation, but we must go in the Spirit of Jesus, the spirit of reconciliation, humility and healing. We are not going to make people feel guilty or to cause greater upset, we are simply going in a mission of peace, to offer a hand of friendship and to see if we can solve the issue through dialogue – listening and understanding.

If the person listens, you've made a friend, said Jesus. *Praise the Lord!*

Healing begins and the situation is repaired. The church can go forward and witness to the love and peace of Christ which goes out into the community.

But if the person does not listen - if the person sticks their heels in and won't budge and is not willing to enter into dialogue, then you have a problem. What do you do now?

If it were a legal matter, in the days of Jesus, you could take it to the courts, and in the courts you would try and sort it out with a small group of reliable people who are witnesses to the situation; but I think it's more than this, I think this small church group would be trying to reconcile the situation, facilitate healing, and give the parties a chance to be heard and to share their feelings and hear both sides of the story.

This again needs to be done in humility, with peace our main goal. It's not about personal revenge, it must be done in the spirit of Jesus, done in love. For Jesus said that we should turn the other cheek, go the extra mile to bring about peace.

But again, if he or she won't listen, then the next step is that this small group takes it to the church leadership, those entrusted with making important decisions on maintaining peace and unity.

No one wants their dirty washing aired in public but this is the process that Jesus lays before his disciples.

This third and final step is a big step because it is involving more people and a decision will be made publicly as to the final outcome.

Again, this must be done with the goal of reconciliation in mind.

But Jesus said, if he won't listen to the church, then you must treat him like a pagan or tax collector. There is a real sense that everything possible has been done to try and seek reconciliation, and that it is not possible, and all efforts have been refused, and to make matters worse, the person who has caused the trouble will not even listen.

Three times, this has been stated by Jesus, that they have refused to listen. We are not told why, but we get the feeling that this person is a trouble maker, and obviously has an unteachable spirit.

So there comes a painful separation. This person is damaging the fellowship of the church and causing strife and this has caused much pain and heartbreak and expended much effort by the church and there is no place now for this person in the fellowship. The Church is bigger than one person.

But there may be another reading to this story, and that is that Jesus loves sinners and tax collectors. In fact Matthew himself, the author of this gospel was such a person, but he found peace in Christ and he came to know Christ in a personal way that transformed his life. He was changed from being a greedy swindling tax collector into being a person of deep peace and faith.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of this verse, has something totally different from other translations, which when I read it jumped out at me. Yet perhaps he has caught the spirit of Jesus better than all the other translations when he puts it this way, *“If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love.”*

Isn't this beautiful? There is still hope for this person, but it's a bit like snakes and ladders. He has fallen from grace; he has landed on a snake and this has taken him back to the start. There is only one way - back - but that will be determined if he is humble enough to listen and repent and receive God's forgiving love. It ties in with the story of the lost sheep doesn't it?

God always has his eye on the one who gets lost, the prodigal, the sheep, the coin and his heart is always wanting to draw them back into the fold but he waits until they are ready to turn and come home. The prodigal had to see himself at his lowest before he came home with a different attitude. He came home a lot humbler and was ready to be a servant.

Jesus' teaching is a rebuke for all who would disrupt the fellowship of the church because they simply won't listen. There is nothing as painful as being left out and yet Jesus' parables speak often about those who are left out.

Today, we are challenged to think about how we fit into the church family. Have we caused offence to anyone, have we hurt someone unnecessarily?

Have we destroyed fellowship? Then we have a duty to repair the broken walls.

Has someone hurt us and brought about pain in our lives? Then we have a duty also to pray for this person and to go with a loving spirit to share with them the pain that we have felt, and if that person won't listen then we don't give up, but we call others who will help to bring peace to the situation, and if this doesn't work we need to bring it to the church leadership who has to make a decision, and if this doesn't work we still pray for the person that he or she would come to know God's grace and forgiveness.

Jesus said that he has come to bring peace on earth. When we get to heaven there will be no separation, no pain, no tears, for Christ has brought complete peace. Until that day, we must all work at bringing peace to earth and it begins in the Church family.

Amen.