

SERMON Matthew Ch. 18 Domestic Violence and Forgiveness

John and Patricia have been married for thirty seven years. Both have been regular church members and have held positions in the church as sides-persons, as well as being on the PCC.

John is now Church-Warden.

We have always joked about Patricia, who has seemed to be peculiarly accident prone. She herself always laughed about the mishaps that befell her, attributing it to an innate sense of clumsiness. A broken wrist from falling out of bed, a black eye as she turned into an open door, bruises on her face from stepping onto an garden rake, and knocking over a boiling kettle for the badly scalded hand. Yes we saw these injuries on Sunday mornings, and commiserated with her. The doctor grew quite used to her appearance at the surgery, anyway he was a family friend, and John was his son's godfather. John and Patricia have no children of their own, and it's a bit of a tricky subject, so we steer well clear of the subject at dinner parties.

I guess we all knew that John liked a good bottle of red, but we were all profoundly shocked when we learned that, secretly , John has been an alcoholic for some time, and that after clandestine drinking bouts he has abusing Patricia. It all came to light when the last injury necessitated a trip to hospital for stitches to a very nasty cut, and an overnight stay for Patricia. She got very upset during the night and it seems couldn't face going back to John, and told the nurse, who arranged for her to go to our local refuge.

Now it's all out in the open ,I don't think we will see John at the PCC on Tuesday.

We have listened to Matthew 18.

What should John do ?

What should the Vicar do ?

What should the PCC Do ?

Most importantly, what should Patricia do ?

When we start to apply the facts as we know them to the scripture this morning, Matthew presents us with a tension. It is the tension between rose coloured spectacles, and reality.

It is a tension between what the church is now, and what it was in the First century

It is a tension between what we are to one another, and what we should be.

When we read these verses, we have to ask ourselves, what is the emphasis here? Is it on reconciliation? Or is it on exclusion and punishment?

Where should the emphasis be between John and Patricia..... Reconciliation or punishment. What will be the reality?, What is likely to happen ?, What does chapter 18 tell us?

This chapter has been used very differently by various strands of Christianity. It has often been used as an authority for punishment, especially in the strict communities. Remember the story of Silas Marner, wrongly accused of theft, and cast out by his church community. Remember the countless Christians excommunicated or worse by the Catholic Church in the middle ages and later. We remember too those who are buried outside the walls of our church yards because they were beyond the pale, or as in the case of the recent adaptation of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, the result of unchastity.

Jesus says this in his discourse on the practical approach for disciples. 'If your brother refuses to listen, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector' Easy to take that out of context and forget that Jesus did not have an orthodox Pharisee's approach to tax collectors, to pagans, or to sinners. Our examples are obvious, the disciple Matthew, a tax collector, Zaccheus, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus certainly doesn't make it easy for those of us who want a black and white approach !

If we give a little thought to this and ask ourselves what would have happened if throughout church history [let alone secular history] if every Christian judge had applied the 70 times 7 rule of forgiveness, and every Patricia, every victim, had applied the rules in vv15-18. How would things have been different? .

Sadly, I suspect that we rather like the authority that vv15-18 appear to bestow on us, and its route to a swift and simple resolution. We find that the 'endless forgiveness' of the 70 times 7 offends our need for clarity, or sense of natural justice. There's no clean finish.

And yet, and yet..... confronted with a John and Patricia situation, how frequently would we choose to advise Patricia to forgive, to return to the comfortable status quo, for our sakes rather than hers, and how much guilt have we built up for her, if she chooses not to return, not to be seen to forgive.

So this is all very difficult, and it is theology in action

Two further thoughts before we try to pull out some answers for ourselves.

First, one of the later versions of the bible translates the word 'brother' into 'church member'. This I think gives us a clue about where we should be in our relationships with one another. Not members, not occupants of pews, not parts of another village or town hierarchy, but having the same family love for one another as we would for our own loved sibling.

Secondly, Luke also recounts a version of 'how many' question on forgiveness. He however adds another important component. He says that if someone sin against you seven times a day, and each time says to you 'I am sorry, and I repent of my sin' then you must forgive. He states something that we know, that repentance, that contrition, and that a willingness to change, are important factors in our ability to forgive.

So let's try a few propositions, in which the parable with which Matthew completes the chapter is an important factor in guiding our thoughts.

First, the structure of the chapter leads us to the conclusion that he is talking about reconciliation rather than punishment, the response to the 'How many' comes after the 'let the church confront' approach

Secondly the parable speaks to us about true repentance which leads to a fresh approach. The unforgiving servant is condemned precisely because he has known forgiveness, but chosen not to change. So, will Patricia need to know that her forgiveness of John will lead to, and enable him to change ?

Thirdly, what should the PCC and the Vicar do ? It seems that ideally John should be given the opportunity to explain if he chooses to do so, and to accept responsibility, then to receive the love and support of his Christian brothers and sisters. In reality I suspect that a signed letter of resignation is already on its way, which may say something about the community to which we belong, and the effective depth of love and trust that we feel for one another. Members?, or brothers and sisters ?.

In our Diocese we are starting the process of training folk to support victims, and that training will we hope lead to some being trained to work with folk like John who desperately need to understand why they do what they do. If you feel called to this work speak to me later.

The most important lesson for us today though, is that this is a hard chapter, that there are no short cuts or easy answers. That working this out, is about the depth of love we have for each other, and the degree to which we can be open with one another, and create a safety net in these situations. Above all it is to know that when we come together here and now, we come as children of the Cross, with all its pain and separation. But we come also in the Name of the Risen Jesus, in **his** power, and not our own.