

Being the Body of Christ, the People of God

Exodus 12: 1 – 14; Romans 13: 8 – 14; Matthew 18:15 – 20

1

Our Gospel reading says, if someone refuses to listen to the church, let them be to you as the idol worshipper or tax gatherer – you must break off fellowship with them.

I wonder what could possibly have counted as serious enough matter for the church to take this step.

My guess is that money, business deals or property, often cause the problem. Money is a root of all evil

In 1 Corinthians 6 St Paul confronts Christians who take each other to court. *One brother goes to law against another, in front of unbelievers he says – I can't believe it.*

Going to law is generally about money or property.

Paul says. Haven't you got any wisdom amongst you to settle these disputes; the church should decide between quarrelling Christians.

That's a very high view of the church isn't it; let the church decide – surely not! Yet we should never forget that the church is the body of Christ; our goal is to make our church worthy of that great description, the body of Christ. No matter that we fall so far short; our aim must be to be to live up to Christ's name, as individuals and as the church. It goes without saying that the way to this is the way of humility and faith and love – for who is sufficient for these things.

We are really meant to be brothers and sisters in Christ. We are not just a club; we are the servants of God. So let's be the real thing.

Our concept of being a Christian is so low that we accept that brothers and sisters in Christ might fall out and break ties, break relationship, go their separate ways, even over a business deal; but God's desire is to mend all broken ties; Christ suffered on the cross that all breaks might be mended.

It's funny how we Christians think that our business matters are entirely private; a pastor at a conference for Christian business men challenged all these dedicated Christians to tell the person next to them how much their

annual salary was – you can imagine the shock. That’s my business – oh, not the Lord’s business?

There’s a narrow line between true wisdom and worldly wisdom. For myself I think it safer to keep business relationships out of the church.

Our gospel comes between two great statements about forgiveness; the parable of the lost sheep; and Jesus saying, forgive 70 times 7. 7 is the perfect number; forgive with perfect forgiveness

Surely nothing should exclude anyone from the gathering of God’s people, from the forgiveness of God. Yes, nothing should – but refusing to hear the church on really serious matters – abuse, financial exploitation, slander, violence - means excluding yourself from the church.

Actually Good News is the positive aim of the passage; this passage is not about excommunication at heart, it’s about how do we put things right between us in the church when they go wrong; its aim is to restore relationship, by communication and understanding - by sorting problems out; and where offence has been given, on one or both sides, by apology and by changing behaviour. That’s what it aims at, a practical way of reconciliation, a bringing to bear the grace of the cross.

We are a small enough unit to really practice that

2

When we pass from our gospel to the Old Testament reading we pass from the little local church to the whole of God’s people, Israel of the first covenant.

The feast of the Passover is the feast of liberation; liberation from the slavery of Egypt; it is spring festival, a feast of beginnings; it is at this point that Israel is set free. Israel has far to travel through great dangers and temptations; but here it is freed from its slavery to take up its life in God.

Israel is to come out of Egypt; and it takes great courage to start anew, to leave slavery, to be free, to step an unknown future, to follow Christ. But the step is taken with Him.

The bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, the eating standing, staff in hand all speak of hurry, of dropping everything, to get going – no delay, get on with it, don’t stay where you are. It’s the time of liberation.

But though the Passover is the feast of freedom it is not without sacrifice and atonement. Now it is not easy for us to project our thinking back into the world of sacrifice. A lamb was sacrificed, its blood smeared on the doorposts. And with these strange acts comes an amazing promise; the angel of judgment will pass over Israel and they will be protected. This is God's gift, God's saving action; and the completion of the Passover is that the lamb is eaten for strength and joy, so that they make undertake the journey.

Out of this comes the community of Israel, God's people. What are they to do with their freedom? The law of God is given at Mount Sinai to guide and keep Israel in unity with God and each other

The people of Israel celebrated the Passover for centuries; each year renewed gratitude for the deliverance. Maybe a hundred thousand gathered each year in Jerusalem. And of course it was at the Passover that our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified; where he offered his life to God in faithful suffering for us; and where he rose again in sign of the freedom from sin and death that God has given us in Christ.

Christ has achieved our liberation. Set free – set free for what; to be the body of Christ. Christ has given himself to us, our God; then shall not we give ourselves to Christ, individually and as Jesus people. This is freedom, to be in him.

Our third reading gives us some guidance about how to use our freedom. Israel received the ten commandments; we receive the great commandment, the new commandment – love one another; for whoever loves another has fulfilled the law.

All the commandments are summed up in the word of Jesus that Paul quotes – *Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Paul says, therefore *love is the fulfilling of the law.*

What a great word fulfil is; to fill out completely; to bring the promise to its destined outcome; to fill to overflowing, to complete or perfect.

Now I want to keep this really simple for us all, especially for myself

it doesn't mean simply trust your feelings to guide you. Love is not unintelligent.

Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart – yes with your feelings – with all your soul – the whole you, - with all your mind – with all your thought – with all your strength - you full commitment and will

It means, be alive to Jesus.

Sometimes our feelings flow - but often they don't. Take the commandment to honour our parents. To be really grateful to our parents for example means really thinking about them, about how old they were when we were young – just kids themselves perhaps – about what they had suffered – and sacrificed for us. Our parents aren't perfect, but usually we have good reason to be grateful. You see this is love – bringing all of ourselves to Jesus party.

Now this is not about being super-intelligent – it's about having a good heart. People with a good heart generally do the right thing though they may not have much education – Jesus said, *blest are the pure in heart.*

Which means we have to be serious with ourselves about what divides our heart

To be free in the freedom Jesus bought for us – St Paul says lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light

Drunkenness, quarrelling, jealousy, these divide the heart; put them off, discard them like dirty clothes – and put on the clean clothing of Jesus Christ. Get serious about cleaning up your soul

Then we can face the great questions of life

Taking responsibility for our own life we can apply our freedom to freeing up the life of other

– the life of the very young, the very old, the very sick,

- the abandoned, the refugee, the misfit, the rebel

Fulfilling the love of God means bringing fullness of our mind and heart and commitment to life.

To really love we need to pray; and think; to open our hearts in sincerity; to meet with Jesus in the church, in worship, in our friends, or service, in reflection on what Jesus says to us in his gospel, in our hearts, in our experience. So, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and love as he loved us

