

St Mary's, Dorchester and Ss Simon and Jude, Winterbourne Monkton. Sunday 6th September 2026, i.e. 14th after Trinity.

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Romans 13:8-end
Matthew 18:15-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the many guilty pleasures of twenty-first century life is watching other people arguing on social media. Whatsapp is great for this – by which I mean, not so great. I'm part of a large and diffuse group of people who share a Whatsapp chat to keep in touch. Most of the group are Christians, which normally keeps things civilised. But the other day one member of the group managed to insult someone who they know only slightly in real life, and the insulted party took offense. There was a brief but intense blossoming of argument, before the offender clearly decided that they could get away with pretending they hadn't done anything wrong; and the offended party clearly decided that they could get away with pretending that the other party didn't exist. Another friend changed the subject by posting photos of their kids in their new school uniforms; and the chat moved on. As I say, social media is great for this sort of thing, and not so great.

My guilty pleasure watching these conflicts unfold is something for me to talk about with my spiritual director. But there are other questions here that should occupy all of us. What is conflict, and how should we address conflicts that arise? I'd like to spend some time this morning talking about those things.

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I should probably begin by saying what I mean by conflict. Recently Lydia learned a really neat definition, which she shared with me. Conflict is "difference plus tension". I like that definition because it encompasses everything that we include in the word conflict: everything from spats over the right way to do the washing up, to wars between nations. It also helps to explain why conflict starts, and why it suddenly stops. In my Whatsapp group, there was – briefly – enough difference and enough tension to make a conflict happen. But as soon as one person decides that it isn't worth it, and they sign out – emotionally or practically – the conflict disappears; there isn't any tension any more. Likewise, in the rare event that one person unilaterally puts their own views to one side, the difference disappears, and so does the conflict. I have seen that happen; it's usually a strategy to buy some time before starting the argument again; it's not a solution.

Saying that conflict is “difference plus tension” has some interesting effects. Putting it that way, conflict sounds a lot like learning. Learning is where I find myself in a creative tension with the world around me; I am confronted with something new, something different, and my world has to change. “Difference plus tension” is also not a million miles away from the phenomena that we lump together under the word “love”. Love almost always takes us outside of ourselves, it requires some kind of difference. You might say that in many cases love pulls us outside of ourselves: it is a tension that we learn to savour.

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Jesus famously says to his disciples that they should love one another; and that them loving one another will be *the sign* that they are in fact his disciples [John 13:34-35]. Paul, likewise, in our Epistle today says that love is the only thing we should owe one another [Romans 13:8]. I think statements like these are very easily misunderstood: plenty of Christians take them to mean that conflict has no place within the Church. That sounds like a great idea, but that desire on its own it isn’t enough. Being conflict averse isn’t the same as actually loving your neighbour. In fact, I’ve observed that in many cases the desire to avoid conflict at all costs makes you more likely to engage in the messier sorts of conflict: passive aggression; manipulative behaviour; bullying, and so on. These are the tactics of someone who doesn’t want to admit that there is real difference in a relationship. Not wanting to admit it doesn’t make the difference go away: it just ties everybody up in knots.

In any case, Jesus doesn’t say that people will know that we are Christians “if we have no conflict”: he says that we will be known by our mutual love. As I’ve said before, love is about desire: wanting to be with people, and wanting what’s best for them. A lot of the time, desiring those things will mean not fighting with someone; but that’s not always true. Sometimes we argue because we love someone; and walking away from a fight is sometimes a sign that the love has gone from a relationship.

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus has laid some groundwork for his thoughts about Christian community. So, for example, when he’s talking about anger in chapter five Jesus says,

...when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your

brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. [Matthew 5:23-24]

This is part of the reason we exchange the peace before our Offertory prayers at the Eucharist. The assumption is that if we know anyone has a problem with us for any reason we must make every effort to reconcile with them. And notice that it doesn't say, "if you remember that someone has a *good* reason to dislike you" – any reason is enough. Going to your brother or sister and reminding them that they have something against you is unlikely to be easy. In fact, by doing that you are renewing a conflict: you are reminding them of a difference, and you are restoring the tension between the two of you. But Jesus clearly thinks this is good conflict: it's a conflict that has a chance of becoming a new and deeper relationship.

This week's Gospel reading is a mirror image of that teaching. Jesus says,

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone... [Matthew 18:15]

I say this is the mirror image of his teaching about anger: there, the problem is that I may or may not have done something to cause another person's anger. Here, the problem is caused by the other person: they're the one who may or may not have done something to me. And again, the hope is that by confronting someone – by initiating a good conflict – you and your community are working on deepening relationships, making something new.

Jesus doesn't allow Christians the luxury of hiding behind a victim mentality. He doesn't even allow us the luxury of believing ourselves to be wrongly accused of something, and suffering in silence. Whenever there is conflict – whether it's caused by sin, or an honest mistake, or by misunderstanding – we must do everything we can to address it. That means that many of the usual tactics for avoiding conflict don't sit well in Christian community. Gossip, resentment, complacency, passive aggression... none of these options are left open to Christians.

If there is any conflict in a church, we have four options. First, we can meet the other party on more-or-less equal terms, attempting to reconcile by admitting some share of responsibility for the conflict and stating our desire for peace – that's what Jesus describes in chapter five. In the second place, if the greater part of responsibility falls on us, we can admit our own guilt and openly repent – that's also implied by what Jesus says in chapter five. In the third place, if we feel the need for a public or private admission of guilt from the other party before we can forgive them, we can

appropriately challenge them [Matthew 18:15-17]: first going alone; then taking a trustworthy witness; then taking the matter to the church; and then treating the offender as a “Gentile and a tax collector”, whatever that means. And our final option, implied by next week's Gospel, is that if we cannot or will not challenge the person, we must forgive them unilaterally [Matthew 18:21-22]. These four choices exhaust all of our options. Conflict must be addressed.

Jesus points us towards a pattern of community life where conflict is neither failure nor violence, but something necessary and desirable. As Christians we have to believe that at least some of our differences are divinely ordained: they are gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which we are made members of one body, and members of one another [Romans 12:4-5]. We don't make conflicts within the body of Christ go away by pretending that we are the same, or by leaving each other alone. It is by challenging each other, by learning together, that we become the community God calls us to be.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.