

Communion Service Sunday 6th September – led by Martyn Macphee



Martyn is a regular and very welcome leader of our worship, so the burst of machinegun fire provided by the sound system elicited shock, a feigned wound to the heart and a big smile. All part of the PBURC experience for our great band of worship leaders.

The day's New Testament Reading was from Matthew 18, which Martyn felt was about Matthew's ordered world. Matthew had been an organiser of the first order who'd loved to take subjects and place them where they belonged. He'd not told the story of Jesus in his particular way because he believed every event unfolded in that exact sequence. He'd told it that way because it served his purpose. Matthew's purpose had been order—and not just order, but perfect order.

That was why the Sermon on the Mount appeared in three tightly woven chapters in Matthew. It was very likely that Jesus had not preached all those words in one place at one time. Luke had recorded much of the same teaching, but scattered it throughout the narrative, which might well reflect how it was first spoken. Luke had simply not been as concerned as Matthew with keeping his Gospel neat and tidy.

Matthew had wanted everything in its proper place - and that included his church – and many biblical interpreters might say that this part of Matthew's Gospel had less to do with the immediate experience of Jesus' disciples and more to do with his own church. Conflict had arisen within the congregation, and Matthew, with his orderly mind, could not bear the messiness of it. He wanted things made right. Remembering the teaching of Jesus, he'd presented it as a clear message to his fellow believers: when people fell out with one another, there was a way to deal with it.

The instructions were simple enough. If a brother or sister in Christ sinned against you, you were to go to them privately and explain what had happened and how it had affected you.

- If they listened, reconciliation had begun.
- If they did not respond redemptively, take one or two others with you as witnesses and try again.
- If they still refused to listen, tell the church.
- If they would not listen even to the church, then the relationship with that fellowship was broken.

“Where Two or Three Are Gathered”

We loved the verse in which Jesus said that where two or three are gathered in his name, he was there among them. Yet it could be one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible because we took that promise out of context. The verse was not primarily about prayer meetings, worship services, or small congregations. It was about church conflict—about disagreement, hurt, and the hard work of reconciliation.

At first glance, Jesus might seem an unlikely person to advise us on conflict management. He'd ended up on a cross, and the biblical record showed that *he'd* brought the confrontation with the religious authorities in Jerusalem to a head. Yet his teaching made more sense when we attended to its spirit. For one thing, Jesus placed the burden on the person who had been wronged. That was just like Jesus, turning our expectations upside down: the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The person who had been hurt was called to take the first step - act of deep humility. Having already been made vulnerable by the offence, the wounded person was being asked to become vulnerable again—to approach the one who caused the hurt and give them the opportunity to put things right.

Jesus had not been primarily interested in proving who was right and who was wrong. What mattered to him was whether the relationship could be restored. Matthew had understood this too. There were people who had an astonishing ability to remember every slight: the careless remark, the tiny snub, the wound that was never addressed. They allowed it to fester until resentment and anger were all that remained. But in the kingdom of heaven, the final issue was not what had been said, who had been offended, or who had received the short end of the stick. The real question was whether the relationship could be restored.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis had imagined hell as a vast city inhabited only at its outer edges. The houses at the centre stood empty because the people who'd once lived there had quarrelled with their neighbours and moved away, leaving the streets empty behind them. That, Lewis had said, was how hell had become so large: empty at the centre, occupied only at the margins - a powerful image of what happened when people chose distance instead of honest confrontation.

So for us, were we really willing to give up relationships that had been formed through our shared desire to follow Jesus? Nowhere in the Gospels had Jesus said that the first order of business was always to be right. He'd spoken instead about forgiveness, relationship, reconciliation, service, humility, and vulnerability. Yet it was precisely among people gathered together—with all their disagreements, hurts, apologies, and tensions—that Jesus had promised to be present. “Where two or three are gathered in my name,” he'd said, “I am there among them.”

When we were together, arguments could break out, disagreements could surface, and controversy could divide. But when we were together, God would be with us—breathing his Spirit upon us and calling us to be the family of God.