

6 September 2020; Trinity 13/ Proper 18

Romans 13: 8-14; Matthew 18: 15-20

Ashdon 9.30am

1. The difficulties of reading scripture

We can probably all think of times when we have said things that have been misunderstood. Recently we watched the TV adaptation of the novel 'a Suitable Boy' in which a misunderstanding occurs, and a relationship flounders when one character tells another 'don't be mean'. The man who hears this is one who is generous to a fault and proud of it; he hears a reproach that is not intended. The speaker is simply asking him not to stop her having fun. The problem is that the word has multiple meanings, and the boy and girl are also coming to the conversation from different perspectives and bringing different personal baggage to it.

We can possibly also remember times when a person in the family remembers one thing we have said, perhaps in a letter – or e-mail or even text – without putting it in context, and this can lead to misunderstanding. It seems to me that tweets and texts are particularly vulnerable to this, and we often hear nowadays of politicians and celebrities having to apologise for saying something that has struck a false note or revealed an underlying prejudice.

Human communication is fraught with difficulty, and always has been. It is not surprising therefore that reading the Bible is fraught with pitfalls. This is a collection of documents that was written many years ago, over a period of several hundred years by different authors. Different books of the Bible were written in different languages and have been subject to translation through several languages by the time they reach us. Scholars spend many years seeking to mine the riches it contains; yet for the rest of us, it sits as an apparent whole, and we read it in bits with the benefit of very little interpretation beyond a five minute sermon once a week.

It seems to me that the pitfalls in applying scripture to our lives today are well illustrated by our readings, so I want to use them to look at two different sets of problems: the issue of selectivity, and the social contexts of both writer and reader, before asking why we bother!

2. Selectivity

The first issue is that of selectivity. It is very easy, is it not, to have 'favourite verses'. The last verse of our gospel reading is one of these - very familiar to us,

especially to those of us who are members of small churches. When attendance is poor and we even dwindle occasionally to single numbers, we use it to reassure ourselves that even two or three people matter to God – He is here in the midst of us, however small and insignificant we feel ourselves to be. I believe that this is true, and there is nothing wrong with a bit of reassurance when we are in danger of feeling discouraged. Whilst using Bible verses in this way has its place, it needs to be balanced by a broader understanding.

This broader understanding is not helped by the way that we read the Bible in church: in chunks. Now I am all in favour of following prescribed readings. These have been worked out by committees of scholars and enable us all, over the weeks, to hear the scriptures – a different gospel each year in a three year cycle and readings from the epistles and Old Testament that complement them. The danger of this is that we may lose context. Our gospel reading today is part of a section of teaching from Matthew about how we should behave in relation to other people. And it is preceded by instructions not to cause others to stumble, going after the lost sheep and forgiveness. This context gives the instructions about how to cope with dissent a very different feel.

3. Two social contexts

And then we come to the social contexts of both the writer of a passage and of ourselves as readers. First the gospel writer, Matthew. Matthew's gospel was probably written in 80 or 90 AD – for second and third generation Christians. Much of the material in Matthew is also found in Mark – the earliest of the gospels, but Matthew is the only gospel to have an explicit concern for the early Christian community and its behaviour. He combines narrative – the story of Jesus' life – with discourse – passages of teaching. And our passage is taken from one of the 5 discourses in Matthew – the one concerning the Christian community and Christian relationships. Matthew is a pastor concerned to teach the early church how to live together.

And that church was not the same as the church we inhabit now, or indeed the church here in England in previous centuries. That does not mean that what he has to say is not relevant, but we do need to understand these differences, just as the two characters in my initial examples needed to understand each others' backgrounds.

The church in Matthew's day was a small community of people who had taken a very definite and courageous stand. His community was possibly one that had been banned from the Jewish synagogues, but whose members still felt themselves to be Jewish. Today we are the remnants of a church that was established and – in the recent past – accepted as 'normal'. There could not be a greater contrast. So can we learn anything across such a divide?

Firstly, I think, that although unity matters, this is not a wishy washy unity. This whole sermon of Matthew on Church life is set in the context of Jesus' journey to the cross. Discipleship – like Jesus' own ministry - is costly, he is telling us. Last week we heard Matthew's account of Jesus telling Peter that if anyone would be a disciple of his, they must take up their cross, and lose themselves to gain true life. No wonder this is not an easy going 'anything goes' message for the church when disputes arise.

Another lesson is that how we deal with conflict matters. Whilst we may not simply apply the processes commended by Matthew to very different church context we live in now, we do need to engage in 'proper' listening, seeking to hear and where possible fully understand another person's world and perspectives in order to strengthen community even across differences of view.

Disagreements in the national Church are often played out in the media. How do we deal with these, nationally and at a local level?

One current area of conflict within the church has been over gay relationships. It is still a subject on which there are different firmly held views, but two examples of 'good practice' give encouragement. At a Diocesan level, a recent process called 'shared conversations' was held in which church people who had different – even opposing – views on this issue were invited to spend time together in supervised groups seeking to understand each other. And at parish level, a controversial questionnaire led our 4 PCCs to set aside a whole meeting to discuss the issue. I won't say we came to a consensus, but within just a few weeks we happened to have a gay couple visiting the church, and the time we had spent together enabled us to welcome them fully and respond in a loving way.

None of us likes unpleasantness, but disagreement does not always have to lead to offence. We need perhaps today's reminder of the importance of our collective behaviour. We are not meant simply to come together once or twice a week and to co-exist, to enjoy each

others' company for a limited time, but to seek together to understand more of each other and of God's ways. Only then can we grow in the sort of love for each other commended in our first reading. The love and unity Paul urges on us are not easy things that just come from being nice people.

Despite all the problems I have outlined, the scriptures are an endless source of nourishment for us. It is our belief that they were written by people inspired by God, and they give us a picture of the man Jesus who is at the centre of our faith. Like a collection of photo albums and letters, they enable us to get to know him, but we do really need to **work at this**, sharing perceptions and understandings just as one might share memories of a loved one who has passed away.

God is indeed with us when even a few gather together united in His Spirit of love – so may it be for us here as we seek to be true to Him in this place.

Amen