

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Wherever there's a gathering of people – a small gathering, like a family or a football team; or a big one, like a university or a church – there will almost inevitably be disagreements, misunderstandings and fallings-out from time to time. That they occur is no cause for alarm; what happens next may well be.

On the one hand, differences of opinion or 3 can lead to brooding and bitterness, and in the case of nation states even to armed conflict. On the other hand, they may result in healing, in helpful discussions, in the airing of grievances. There can be little doubt which is the wise and which the foolish course of action to take. In Winston Churchill's famous quip, "to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

Today's readings center on how to best address the problems that arise within the local church, in particular on the task of brotherly or sisterly correction. This is clearly a delicate and often thankless task, and yet there are times when it **has** to be done. Ezekiel, who we heard in our first reading, insists that just as a sentry is duty bound to warn of approaching danger, so he, the prophet, must warn those who persist in wickedness of the consequences of their actions.

If this language sometimes seems harsh, it's because the issue is so serious. Indeed, in some ways Ezekiel's words foreshadow Jesus' own teaching, as presented to us in today's Gospel. There he reminds us that we have a familial duty to do what we can when a brother's or sister's behavior causes offence, especially when it is a threat to the well-being of the community. The first step is to deal with the matter privately and informally, in the hope that it will result in a peaceful settlement. It is far better to have the courage to speak with wrong-doers face to face than to gossip about them behind their back.

If that fails, stage two is to get the assistance of a couple of others; it will be more difficult to reject the advice of two or three people than that of one. Finally, as a last resort, the matter may have to be brought to the community; and should wrongdoers persist in their waywardness, then they're cutting themselves off from that community. This may have to be officially acknowledged. However, "excommunication" – whether it be from family or

any other community - should be rare and should be used not as a punishment but rather as encouragement to the wrongdoer to return to the fold. If, as the Gospel puts it, such a person is to be treated “like a pagan or a tax collector”, that does not mean that the community are to wash their hands of him or her. On the contrary, just as pagans and tax collectors were a special focus of Jesus’ ministry, so Jesus teaches us to include them in the community’s mission also.

The second reading puts things into perspective: Paul teaches us that “Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbor.” Christian correction makes sense only when it is done in the spirit of love. To correct with love means that we don’t set out simply to win an argument; we don’t descend to sarcasm; we are deeply conscious of our own weakness and sinfulness; we do what we are called to do, aware that the Lord alone knows hearts and can change them.

Loving others may be relatively easy when it’s a matter of being generous and compassionate towards them. But there is another, deeper and more costly love: there may be times when we are called to practice the love that cares enough to confront, to challenge and even to oppose. Genuine love refuses to collude with wrongdoing through silence, though there may be situations where wisdom dictates that, for the time being at least, silence is the best policy.

Whenever we have courage to oppose what is evil we are involved in the Church’s task of binding and loosening – binding the evil forces that oppress people, loosening the bonds that prevent them from living the fullness of life in God’s kingdom. The Christian is called to love enough to speak uncomfortable truths at times – but always in humility and love. The final words of today’s Gospel apply not only to communal prayer but also to every honest attempt to restore peace and harmony within the community: “where two or three meet in my name”, Jesus promises, “I shall be there with them.”

