

## Sermon for Sunday 10 September 2023 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

*Ezekiel 33.7-11; Psalm 119.33-40; Romans 13.8-14; Matthew 18.15-20*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

As I came to our Gospel passage to look at what we were going to look at together today, I got quite uncomfortable. And I fully expect that you will maybe be uncomfortable by the end of it. I make no apologies. This is going to be a subject that as good Anglicans, good reserved people in the Church of England, that we may be a little bit uncomfortable with, and we may need to go away and digest how we apply it as a community of people who are following Jesus.

The reading from Ezekiel tells us of God saying to the prophet Ezekiel that he has a responsibility, as the person speaking for God, hearing from God and speaking for God, that when God's people are not living the way God's people were meant to, that as a prophet, he was to point it out. And you can look through all the prophets. A lot of their work was to say to Israel, to the people of God, this is the way you should be living, this is the way you are living, and they are not compatible. And, basically I paraphrase, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and all the rest of them will probably hate this paraphrase, but basically saying, if you don't get your act together, there's going to be trouble. And the history of Israel is disobedience, exile; disobedience, exile.

It was a great responsibility to point out to God's people where they weren't measuring up to what God was calling them to. It was a great responsibility. And Ezekiel, in the Old Testament reading, we have this idea of the wicked going astray - I've used the shorthand 'self way' as opposed to 'God way'; okay? It's all about self. Some of you, shall we say, less mature, and I mean not in activity, but in age, may know a track that came out a couple of years ago, 'It's all about the bass'; it's all about God's ways, but we are too often all about our own way. And what does the Book of Common Prayer confession say? 'Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.'

Now, we've not read the bit that comes just before, but just before this in the Gospel, so last week, no, two weeks ago, we had Peter declaring that Jesus was the Christ; last week we had him getting into trouble by saying, 'You may be the Christ, but you're not going to suffer and die', and getting a rebuke for it. We then jumped a bit, we've jumped the Transfiguration because that's celebrated another time of the year, in chapter 17 of Matthew's Gospel. A couple of healings, just a couple of healings, and then the story of the little children coming to Jesus and the disciples not wanting them to be there, talking about if you're a stumbling block to little children. And then Jesus goes on with the parable of the lost sheep, the one lost sheep out of the hundred; the sheep, if you like, who has erred and gone its own way; and it's no longer part of the flock. And Jesus says, wouldn't a shepherd go after that sheep and bring them back to the sheepfold?

So what's all that got to do with our gospel reading? Did anybody notice if you were reading along or you know the passage, a couple of words that Pete, deliberately, at my request, missed out? Anybody? Anybody notice it? Did I just see Jan's hand go up? '*...against you*'? It was indeed; if another member of the; we say church, but ecclesia - it's just 'gathering'; if a member of the gathering, if a member of the community - we've adopted the word for Christian church, but that's not what the gospel writer was talking about - sins **against you**. The word 'against you' is not in the original text, it was added much later, possibly to tie up with what Peter says in the next part of the gospel, where he's asking, 'What if somebody sins against me? How many times must I forgive?', and they seem to have inserted that bit. But the original text of Matthew's gospel said, 'If another member of the gathering sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone; it's effectively saying, like God says to Ezekiel, 'Be a prophet.'

When someone's going astray that's part of the people of God, privately, point it out to them - privately. If they don't listen, then take witnesses, not to gang up on them, but just to witness what you say. This goes back to the Old Testament, again. To understand our New Testament, we've got to understand our Old Testament. Old Testament - the witnesses; it was important you look at the Levitical law; you took witnesses when you were correcting somebody. If the person refused to listen, tell them that they are in error, that they are straying away from what God would have them to do as part of a community of believers, in front of the whole community.

Now, there are denominations that have taken that to an extreme, where people would be hauled up on a Sunday morning, and it would be, 'We know what you've been doing in the week; I'm not talking about that sort of abuse, but God's people are called to hold each other, to account for the way they live, and as I say, that's not very Anglican, that's not very Church of England, where we maybe come for a service and we worship together and then we go our separate ways. But this is about community living.

What happens if that person doesn't see the errors of their ways? If you gently point out, do you know that really isn't the way we live as followers of Jesus, maybe we should help you, get alongside you, mentor you. Like that, gentle, taking someone's life, look, we're following Jesus. There's a way of living as a result of following Jesus. And what you're doing, isn't it, you're going astray. Because the purpose, as Paul writes to the church at Rome, is for the brothers and sisters of a community to love one another. And there's two parts of love. There's not doing something to somebody that is contrary to love, but there is also doing things that is loving, and bringing correction so that somebody can live a life that is more reflective of following the Lord Jesus Christ is a loving thing to do.

Are you still with me, or are you very uncomfortable Anglicans this morning? Let's take some examples very quickly as I come to a conclusion. This is Paul writing to the church at Corinth, pointing out a few things that they're getting wrong. I wrote to you in my previous letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons, not at all meaning the immoral of the world; notice it's not about the world, it's about the community of believers; or the greedy, and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I'm writing to you not to associate; notice this not association, putting out of the community those who won't live according to the way the community should live.; do not associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister, so a fellow believer, who is sexually immoral or greedy,

is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or robber; do not even eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging those outside (that's those outside the community) is it not those who are inside that you are to judge, because God will judge those outside? But Scripture tells us to drive out the wicked person from among you. It's about the purity of the people of God, so that we can be a light to the nations, a light to people who so desperately need the good news of the Gospel.

This is Jude, likely Jesus's brother Judas, who only used his shortened name to avoid being tarred with the same brush as Judas Iscariot; 'But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in the love of God. Look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Have mercy on some who are wavering. Save others by snatching them out of the fire. And have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.' But then Jude has this lovely ending, 'Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory, with rejoicing to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority before all time, now and forever.'

And just revisiting what Paul wrote to the Roman Church, 'Love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.' Brothers and sisters, we love one another by being loving towards one another. And sometimes that may involve gentle correction. How we work that out in practice, we have an outline in our gospel reading. But let's encourage one another to hold ourselves and each other to the sort of standards that the people of God should hold themselves to, as we seek to be a community of believers here in this place. Amen.