



## Sermon: - 10th September 2017

# “Where everybody knows your name!”

*Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:15-20*

When I was working for the Ministries Council, one of the things I had to do was to organise conferences for students in training for ministry. At several of these conferences there were workshops on preaching. One such seminar was entitled, “Preaching on Difficult Texts”. The seminar leader had a list of what he called difficult texts. But what he called a difficult text was surprising. I don’t mean that he had identified the difficult texts from the Bible, although there are many of them, he didn’t actually have a list of texts, rather he had a list of several ways we might find a text difficult.

He suggested that we might find it difficult because it’s hard to understand, and there are plenty of them. He also said that we might find it difficult because it seems to contradict a verse elsewhere in Scripture, and there are many of those too. He said we might find it difficult because it seemed to contradict our theology and give a picture of God that we don’t agree with.

Or, he said, we might find it difficult simply because we don’t like what it says! For me this passage this morning is one of those difficult texts, and it falls into that last category, I really don’t like what it says. Although now I think about it, it falls into the other three categories as well!

I’m not sure why I find it so tricky but I think it might be something to do with the concept of pointing out someone else’s sin, which Jesus criticises elsewhere in the gospels, and then if they refuse to hear it we take along the heavy squad to beat them into shape! Unlikely as it might sound, I have known Christians, and indeed fellowships, who have behaved that way. Someone within the fellowship has done something that others within the fellowship didn’t agree with and so the first person has been ostracised from the Christian community. I don’t know about you but I struggle to think that that is a Christian way to behave.

Also, it doesn’t seem to quite fit with the paragraph that immediately precedes it, called the parable of the wandering sheep. Here Jesus says, “If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for

the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.”

Somehow these two passages don't quite seem to fit together, one talking about ostracising someone from a community and the other talking about going in search of the lost member of the community. So, what do we do about this?

At heart, I think this passage is about community. It's about the unity of the church, and this is one of the few places in the Gospels with the word church is used. It's the church community, the fellowship. And the point about the church community is that the unity of the community matters. So much of the teaching of Jesus was about how to get along with one another. How to treat one another well, how to love one another. Paul, too, writes often about how to live in community with one another, and in the Roman's passage he spells out clearly what a community of Christians should look like. And in this way, God is glorified and the kingdom of heaven is built on earth. The kingdom of God exists where there is community. Here, though, Jesus recognises that the community is made up of flawed human beings who will hurt one another. And so, he basically outlines a process of conflict resolution. This passage describes a good way of dealing with disputes.

The problem with how we interpret the passage I think is the word, “sins”. It seems to invite judgement on our fellow Christians and Jesus elsewhere is so vehement that we should not judge our fellows, and indeed Paul in Romans passage says, “why do you judge your brother or sister? Why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgement seat.” I don't think it can mean what it seems to mean. Rather I think what is really meant here is, “if your brother or sister hurts you!” I don't think this is about us sitting in judgement on one another; I don't think this is about me deciding that your behaviour is unacceptable; I don't think this is about rules and regulations, who breaks them and who keeps them, I don't think this is about who is in and who is out. I think this is about a breakdown of relationship between two people. And what Jesus is suggesting is that instead of complaining to everyone else about that person's behaviour; instead of backbiting, gossiping, or grumbling to others, we take our hurt, our upset, even our anger, directly to the person who is the cause of it. And then we say to them, “you hurt me.” If they refuse to listen then we bring someone else along, but, once again, this isn't about bringing in other people on your side, so that the other person can be beaten into submission. Rather it's about a proper dialogue, held in the presence of other people, who can interpret what's being said in a more helpful manner. The others become a sounding

board for the grievance, they help to maintain calm and a sense of proportion and in a sense, represent one party to the other party helping them both to come to a new understanding of the problem and hopefully a new resolution of the problem. Its community, its hard work, but its community.

The American sitcoms, Cheers, Friends, The Big Bang Theory, are hugely popular and they all have one thing in common, they are about community. They are about a community which accepts all the members of the community in spite of their foibles, their problems, their issues. In these programmes, characters are always falling out with one another and then making up again. They are open with one another about their difficulties and problems are resolved, sometimes through argument, but they are resolved. I think one of the reasons they are so popular is because they portray just that sort of welcoming and accepting community that we recognise and would like to belong to. The catchphrase, “where everybody knows your name” sums up what it means to belong to a community with all the accompanying sense of belonging, safety, being loved and known. The words of the theme tune to Cheers really make this point

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.

Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name,

and they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same

You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

Of course, most communities are not like that. Most communities are much more fragile, and much less accepting of other people's foibles than these fictional communities.

But isn't that the sort of community we want? Wouldn't it be great if people felt they belonged to the church in that way, were accepted, loved? And accepted and loved, not in spite of their faults, but where the faults are also accepted and spoken about openly and healed within the love of the community. Church, where everyone knows your name.

Church, where differences are not a threat to community but help to cement the community because they are dealt with in openness and in love. So, this morning I want to ask you, what kind of community do you want? Do you want a community which is mainly about a social gathering? Do you want something that's a bit more meaningful and intimate, a community which encourages us but can also hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place where we can be honest about our hopes and fears, our dreams but also about our anxieties and our problems? Are we looking for a community where we can just blend in or somewhere that we can really make a difference? The kind of community that Jesus envisages is not easy. It's difficult to be honest with one another.

However, I guess this passage this morning is giving us the tools for that kind of community, an honest open and accepting community. If someone hurts us we go to them and we tell them they've hurt us. If they don't accept what we say then we ask others to come along and mediate. If they still don't accept what we say then we asked the whole church to help us to mend this relationship – and this is what this is about, it's about mending a relationship. And then if they set their face against the whole church and refuse to meet us halfway we are to treat them as a pagan or a tax collector! That sounds pretty harsh, given what we know of the attitudes towards pagans and tax collectors in 1st century Judaea. Until, that is, we remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. He ate with them, he accepted them, and he loved them until they loved him back.

And then right at the end, those few words, “for where two or three gather in my name there I am with them.” And that is the promise of Jesus when we open ourselves up to him and to one another, when we commit ourselves to being community, when we gather together in openness and honesty, there, Jesus will be, in the midst of us.