

# Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

## Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

### **First reading:**

(Ezekiel 33.7-9)

*The Task of the Prophet*

Why did the church choose this passage, about the prophet warning sinners, to pair with the gospel reading about reconciliation?

Partly because every person's sin or failure affects the whole Church. If I fail in my duty to my brother or sister or spouse or child or other dependant, this harms the holiness of the whole Church. I can't shrug it off as no concern of mine: 'I can't be bothered', 'too busy', 'nothing to do with me, anyway'.

Of course, it is all very well for the prophet Ezekiel to point out other people's faults: that is the job of a prophet, to show others how God sees them. Heaven forbid that I should go round telling people their faults! Contrariwise, just occasionally I can learn some home truths about myself when someone flies off the handle; that is the time to listen and learn! Jesus did not denounce sinners: he dined with them.

For myself, there are countless people and occasions on which a healing word, a healing touch can begin the process of growth over the scar tissue. But it must be a healing in love, and unless there is real, overflowing love, keep clear!

### **Question:**

*Is it a good rule to praise four times for every time you correct someone?*

### **Second reading:**

(Romans 13.8-10)

*Love and the Law*

Paul has described the process of salvation, won for us by Christ's loving obedience to his Father.

Now he gives his instructions how we should live as Christians; he merely slips into the basic command of Judaism: love your neighbour as yourself.

Each of these negative commandments he mentions contains a clutch of positive values. If I really love and bond with my spouse, it will never come to adultery. 'You shall not kill' implies also the values of furthering life in all the ways we can. 'You shall not steal' involves also the respect for the property and wellbeing of others. The only debt I owe to anyone is love. It is easy to kid ourselves that we are practising love, when in fact it is self-interest, self-justification. It is easy enough to be loving to our friends (most of the time!), but that is not what Paul means.

In his earlier letter to the Corinthians, he gave us that searching test for true love, 'Love is always patient, never jealous, not boastful or conceited, never rude, never seeks its own advantage', and so on. I can't look many of those qualities in the face without some embarrassment.

### **Question:**

*Can you think of a better set of criteria for real love than 1 Corinthians 13?*

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## **Gospel:**

*(Matthew 18.15-20)*

### *Reconciliation*

In working through the Gospel of Matthew for this year's readings, the Church has had to be selective. In this eighteenth chapter of Matthew on relationships within the community, it is striking that the Church has chosen this passage to put before us.

The first part is all about sorting out disagreements and about forgiveness. Despite the presence of Christ in the Christian community, there are going to be disagreements and mis-understandings in every community and every family. The vital thing is to sort them out and not to let them fester. So here we are given a safe process. Just afterwards, this is supplemented by Jesus' teaching that we have to forgive not just seven times (the perfect number) but 77! That means again and again, without limit.

We also get the reminder that Christ is present always in his community. The same promise is given at beginning (the name Emmanuel means 'God with us') and end of the gospel ('I am with you to the end of time'). Therefore, the decisions of the community will be considered binding in the sight of God. It is especially striking that the same promise is here given to the Church as had earlier been given to Peter himself. Peter on his own wields the authority of the Church.

## **Question:**

*Would you add anything to this process of reconciliation?*

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