

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 4th 2011

The first part of this gospel passage seems to be a later interpretation of what Jesus said, rather than his actual words. Some of it does not sound like Jesus for several reasons: when the person with a complaint against his/ her 'brother' has sought the advice and support of two or three witnesses to no avail, they are to take the matter to the 'community', strictly translated, 'the Church'. In Jesus day there was no established Church with ecclesiastic discipline; then the suggestion that if the 'brother' still refuses to listen or to repent he should be treated like a pagan or tax collector implies that he and they were irredeemable sinners. Jesus was known as the friend of tax collectors (Matthew 9) and sinners and he was at pains to treat them with sympathy and gentleness. He invited himself to dine with Zachaeus, who immediately repented of his greed and promised to give to the poor (Luke 19). He called Matthew to be one of his special friends and he left his money table immediately to follow him for the rest of life. (Luke 5)

In addition there is an implication in this passage, as it is presented to us, that there is a limit to love and forgiveness; forgiveness for the tax-collectors and sinners and for the brother in dispute; in v. 18, the assertion is made that whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Does the church really have the right to withhold forgiveness on God's behalf, rather than to encourage us to believe in God's insatiable love for each one of us?

Perhaps the real challenge for us is to pray for a better understanding of God's love and forgiveness for ourselves and for all people, and a greater appreciation of the importance of loving human relationships with each other, in our families and communities, at the same time acknowledging that there are times when we need friends and the church to help us towards reconciliation. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, the second reading for this Sunday, puts it perfectly: "Avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love.....Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that it why it is the answer to every one of the commandments." Romans 13; 8-10

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