



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time you have seen a disagreement resolved in a positive way for all involved. What made it successful?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

You are invited to take time to bring thanksgivings to God, and then the following response may be used:

Loving and endlessly creative God,
receive our thanks and praises. Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 119:33 – 40

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,

and I will observe it to the end.

**Give me understanding that I may keep your law,
and observe it with my whole heart.**

Lead me in the path of your commands, for I delight in it.

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

**Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.**

Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.

**See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.

Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of all goodness and righteousness,
who loves mercy, who strives for justice,
and who calls us to walk humbly with you,
we come to you aware of our faults and mistakes,
but also trusting in your willingness to forgive.
We name before you now the things for which we say sorry...

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
**we have sinned against you and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed.**

**We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ,**

**forgive us all that we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
that we may do justice, love mercy
and walk humbly with you, our God. Amen**

Reading Matthew 18:15 – 20

Sermon

Having now been in full-time Presbyteral Ministry for over six years, and a local preacher for seven years before that, there are very few Gospel passages I have not engaged with in the three-year cycle of lectionary readings. However, this week's text is one of those select few, and as much as anything else, that is because it concerns quite a challenging subject in conflict management. In my experience, we are not always effective at dealing with conflict in churches, perhaps because there is an assumption that Christians should be 'nice' and thus we should not argue, if it can be at all avoided. The result of an avoidance strategy is not that ignoring outstanding conflict will make it go away, but that it will fester and so lead to growing resentments, mistrust and anger. When conflict finally explodes out into the open, it can be like an iceberg, with the presenting issue visible above the surface equalling but a tiny portion of the ice which has accumulated below the waterline. Hence, while ignoring disagreement, argument and tension may yield a quiet life in the short-term, in the longer run, it is profoundly unhealthy and even toxic.

At the other extreme, it is of course true that few of us would actively choose to be part of communes where conflict is a constant fixture and people are always arguing amongst themselves. Moreover, the work of mediation and conflict resolution is extremely skilled and the stakes are high because when this is done badly, it can make things much worse than if nothing had been attempted. Even when a great

deal of effort and expertise has been channelled into a given conflict over many years, it does not guarantee true reconciliation. Northern Ireland still has so-called 'peace walls' separating communities from each other, and there are no-go areas for Protestants and Catholics alike in cities like Belfast, despite the Good Friday Agreement being in place for twenty-five years. Today's text offers us a framework for dealing with conflict in churches, but itself needs careful handling.

To make sense of this collection of three pericopes – the instruction on dealing with an errant church member in 18:15 – 17, the teaching on binding and loosing matters in 18:18 – 19, and the promise Jesus makes to be present when believers are gathered in 18:20 – we will step back for a moment and consider chapter eighteen of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. The disciples had asked Jesus a question about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1), which says much about their priorities and the power dynamics at play. In reply, Jesus called a small child to come over and told his friends that they needed to become like this in order to enter the Kingdom, before he warned them about putting stumbling blocks in the path of disciples who were humble and childlike, and reminded them that God seeks out the 'lost sheep' (18:2 – 14). In short, Jesus highlights God's care for the most vulnerable in their midst, before going onto teach about the importance of forgiveness in 18:21 – 35. When we frame today's Gospel reading accordingly, we get a strong sense of how justice is key to its teaching.

If there is conflict between siblings in Christ, in the first instance this should be resolved by a one-to-one chat, but if this doesn't succeed, witnesses should be present for a mediated conversation, before as a last resort the whole church community should be involved. When this too fails, the one judged to be at fault should be treated like one of the tax collectors and sinners, says Jesus (18:15 – 17). Now, this framework takes inspiration from instructions found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, but it is also subtly different, in that witnesses present

are there to testify to what is said, rather than to support one person or another as they make their case. This offers some protections for the more vulnerable members of the community; after all, it is never easy to challenge somebody more powerful than ourselves whether in churches or in secular settings, and having others there can help. What's more, we know that Jesus spent a good deal of his time with tax collectors and sinners even when this caused him some trouble, and his eating with them showed he treated them as equals. Hence, this text does not mean we are free to treat others badly.

Jesus goes on to echo what he said to Peter (16:13 – 20), and to tell his friends that those things they bind and loose on earth would also be bound or loosed in heaven (18:18 – 19). Especially given Jesus's teachings on forgiveness in this chapter, this is a powerful reminder that our binding and loosing is not just trivial, but really matters. This encompasses not just conflict within churches, but our whole ethical framework, including how we use our money and time, for example. When he promises that he will be present when they gather (18:20), and not simply when they agree, Jesus is not talking about a smaller gathering for worship as we might assume if we pluck this verse out of context, but about his being alongside us as we grapple with life's challenges and conflicts. Whenever we have human beings, conflict is inevitable at times; how we handle it is what matters.

From this, I think we can take away at least three things. Firstly, the reality of human relations is that disagreements, misunderstandings and arguments are a part of life and not signs of failure. Responding well means being aware of power dynamics as Jesus clearly was in his reaction to a question about status among his disciples. It means caring for the vulnerable in how we handle situations, and not giving into the temptations to seek revenge or trample over others in cases of conflict. We will all sometimes make mistakes and forgiveness is essential if we are to maintain a functional community. In short, how we respond to conflict is a sign of our discipleship given that it is not

realistic to expect people in churches to always agree on everything or never to fall out. The framework outlined here was never intended to be the last word about addressing conflict – after all, it is only six verses long! – but it is a useful place to begin.

Secondly, we need to be careful about how we apply teaching such as this, because it can be abused and cause real harm. When I was an undergraduate student, I had a conversation with a member from one of the more conservative churches in Bath, who openly boasted about how he and some of his friends had hounded gay people out, quoting this reading as 'justification' and arguing they were basically unrepentant sinners. Not only is this mindset deeply harmful, it goes against the real compassion and care Jesus showed time and again even to those the religious authorities shunned and condemned. As much as it is sometimes tempting to judge others, God is in fact the only true judge and is not for us to declare people outside of Jesus's love and concern.

Thirdly, and having just said this, if we are going to be places where people are both welcome and safe, that doesn't mean that anything goes. Sometimes, in order to safeguard the more vulnerable people in churches, we will need to maintain firm boundaries, and hence it may mean excluding individuals on occasion. This is not easy when we want to be inclusive churches, but can be necessary in situations where it would put others in danger. Safeguarding is not an 'optional extra', but an essential part of church life in a messy world, in which we cannot always assume others have good motives. Jesus wasn't naïve and, after all, this teaching follows from a question about who would be the greatest amongst the disciples that reveals some fault-lines and tensions beneath the surface.

To return to where we began, this is not an easy text, and it was just a little tempting to skip over it again! However, in a world that is full of division and polarisation, it has much practical wisdom to offer. May

we have the courage to engage with its teaching and become better at addressing conflicts effectively, so that we might model a different way of being reflecting the love and peace of God, and inviting other people to seek new life. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Justin Welby's 2023 book *The Power of Reconciliation* explores the complex process of conflict resolution and offers helpful guidance.

Prayers of Intercession – Beauty for Brokenness (StF 693)

Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.

Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
work for all people, trade for their skills;
land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak.

Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain.

Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
plundered and poisoned — our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
make us content with the things that we need.

Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
until your justice burns brightly again;
until the nations learn of your ways,
seek your salvation and bring you their praise.

God of the poor, friend of the weak,
give us compassion we pray:
melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
come, change our love from a spark to a flame.

Lord's Prayer

Blessing