

Homily 23rd Sunday of the Year

When to speak out or to give "cruel love" as they say, to be kind, that's difficult isn't it, in any family? We all have to face it sometimes. Parents terribly have to weigh up, "Should I say something? She or he is going to make a terrible mistake there. Or should I let it go and let them learn by their own experience?" This is the big dilemma of any parent in a family. And sometimes, you have to take drastic action.

Having had my poor young brother who died an alcoholic, sometimes you have to cut them off for your own sanity because they're robbing you or whatever. Sometimes you have to have cruel love to be kind, but when to do it? When to place the threat?

And the readings today I suppose, are about dealing with that in the community, the family of the Church. Now, some experts say that Jesus couldn't have possibly said, "Treat them like a pagan or a tax collector", because he came to do his ministry among them. And that Matthew was slightly adjusting Jesus' original saying to suit the community which was predominantly Jewish and would have understood this progression of taking witnesses and then casting them out in that fashion.

But that's by the by. I just thought you'd like that bit of offered interest. Because the principle still stands that Jesus' original saying about if your brother does something wrong, go and have a chat with him alone between your two selves, is something he would have said. Because Jesus had a great sense of dignity, keeping the dignity of a person.

Father Mark used to come up with some really... those of you who remember Father Mark when he was here with me. He used to come out with some pearls of wisdom. And he said, "If ever you have to challenge somebody because of something wrong", he said, "do it in such a way that you leave them a door to exit by with dignity". Isn't that wise? In other words, if you're going to have it out with somebody, leave them a crack, an opening, by which they can bow out, not crushed, but apologize. It's so wise. It's so obvious, one of the hardest things to do. It's the sort of thing that Jesus would have said. Not that I'm saying Father Mark was like Jesus, but he did have a profound sense of spirituality and the message of the gospel.

But this text and the one that follows the Jesus that we know from the other gospels, definitely said, "I tell you solemnly, whatever you bind on earth", and so on. These are the principles, not always practised in good behavior, that the Church applies to itself, understanding itself as the Body of Christ or the family of God. And based on that sort of Ezekiel position, Ezekiel was sent to the people of Israel, he was sent to the believers. He wasn't sent to everybody. So when he's talking about the wicked man, he means the wicked man in the community, somebody who was upsetting the community. And I suppose the Ezekiel text, the real message is this. Although Ezekiel had a distinct vocation as a prophet, the real message is that if we're bystanders and do nothing when something's wrong, then some of that wickedness falls on us. That's the frightening thing

that I find from that scripture text. That if we don't act in a proper way towards something we see that's wrong, then so we don't challenge somebody.

I'm not talking about going up to somebody with a knife about to stab you and say, "That's wrong". I'm on about ordinary relationships with others. If we see something wrong in the Church, if we see... I even think gossip or somebody being maligned, we need to say something sometimes too. And there's ways of doing it, by leaving that door open for a dignified exit.

We don't always do it. Most of us have a slight tinge of retaliation in us, don't we? 'Cause it's nice to get a victory but the gospel message is no retaliation and to remember this door of dignity in challenging someone. But it's the basis of the Church's understanding the theory on paper and hopefully sometimes, the practice. That if there's some scandal in the Church, then that person has to be reprovved and called to repentance. Or if there's somebody misusing things or not doing things properly. And even the principle of ex-communication, as dramatic as it sounds, all it means literally is barred from receiving the sacraments until such a time as the person repents.

So it's never permanent. It's ex-communicated until there's a change of heart. Because the principle is always about reconciling. About bringing your brother or sister back into the true way of behaving. And I think it goes back to the principles that I started on. If you look at your own family, how do you deal with members of your family? Your husband or wife, brother, sister, daughter, son, mother, and father when there's something wrong? Surely you sit down and think about it. I would say pray about it, but most people would just sit down and think about it. You can't let it go on forever. Something has to be done. And the same should apply to us.

When we're working together we need to look after one another. We need, as St Paul says in that second reading, not to be in debt, but to always show love. But sometimes that love has to be hard love if something is being done wrong. And so this binding and loosing isn't a power about beating people up. It's about liberating people and putting a binding on when there's something wrong for so long. And so for us, I think, we can go away and say, "Behavior in the Church, in our life as a community, let me just look afresh. Do I treat it like I would treat my own family?" Because that is the touchstone.