



The new SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 23

Matthew 18:15-20 - *The Church is only faithful when it imitates Christ*

What are the sins of the Christian community?

Jesus continues speaking to his disciples – and in so doing is addressing our Church and our Church communities – about sin. In the earlier passages of this chapter he had taught them the parable of the lost sheep, the one who had strayed and was in danger of being lost forever. Now he is turning inwards, asking the community to examine itself and face up to the reality of sin within its own Christian ranks.

With the lost sheep, the animal had wandered off looking for something more than it could find within the sheepfold. We are not told why it went away, just that it had gone off into the wilderness because somewhere “out there” it hoped it could find what it was that was not available within the sheepfold.

And now today we have a further question being asked: what is the community doing about its own sinful structures and ways of living? Are there things within the community that are driving the struggling sheep to move elsewhere or to abandon the flock altogether? Is the Church (the parish or faith community) standardizing, institutionalizing, accepting, tolerating, promoting or turning a blind eye to the non-Kingdom ways of living and acting? It would be a mistake to think Jesus is talking simply about “sins” as wrongful acts. The *sins* he has in his sights here are the failures that destroy the foundations of the faith community, ruin its reputation in the eyes of the world it is meant to be serving and put obstacles in the way of the suffering and struggling members of the broader community coming to find solace in the graces God wants them to have at our hands.

What is the major sin of the Church?

Christianity has a view of the world that is bound together by a simple narrative, a narrative that has God at its centre. We see this in the Bible where a whole range of very human stories and experiences are brought together and interpreted in the light of a loving God who has a direct Fatherly interest in the “adventures” of those he had created. For Christians, every human moment, all human interaction and every human activity had a God-element and could be understood and assessed in terms of God’s plan for creation.

God confounds the wise, the powerful the rich and the proud

St Paul presented to the Church in Corinth an understanding of the Church that is most upsetting and challenging for disciples of Christ... ²⁷ *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;* ²⁸ *God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,* ²⁹ *so that no one might boast in the presence of God.* Paul is hammering those Christians in Corinth who seem to believe that because they are Christians of some standing in the wider community, they are entitled to a special place of honour in the local faith community. They stood guilty of assessing their fellow human beings according to the standards and measures of the broader Jewish/Roman/Greek world. In so doing it meant there were those sinners and searchers “out there” in the world who would not consider coming to

Christ as they had no hope of measuring up to what they thought the Church expected of its members. For Paul, this was one of the sins hindering the mission and growth of the faith in Corinth. Christians operated no differently from any other social, political and religious group at that time and yet they were never called to *be like the other nations*.

Sin for Paul was going against the ways of God. If God singled out the weak, the poor, the powerless and those on the margins of the society to begin his work on earth, why was it the Church was choosing to put its priorities elsewhere? Was no one challenging this loss of direction and dilution of the Gospel message? Note how Paul has turned the prevailing world view around. God chose the poor and the weak to tell the rich and the powerful about the dangers associated with their privileged status, in order to save them.

God raises the lowly and brings down the mighty

This teaching of Paul is not about making horizontal comparisons – comparisons between what people have and do not have here on earth. Paul is interested in vertical relationships – where a person stands in relation to God, for the only enduring value is the place the heavenly Father has in the day to day lives of believers. It is the Bible that offers us an insight into the way God works at bringing the whole world to know and love him. Paul shows us how it was at Corinth. God chose the weak in that City to bring the Gospel to the powerful.

This is the same God who chose Israel, the less impressive nation on earth in order to bring the divine saving love to all nations. This is the God who down through history has overturned the existing measures of the way the world sets elites in place. This was not to create a new range of elites in the community but to establish his Heavenly Kingdom in which no one could claim privilege over others and those with privileges gladly surrendered them for the good of others. As Isaiah notes, if Almighty God could come down from the heights of heaven to make his home among the humblest of his servants, why would believers not be prepared to imitate that same action (Isaiah 57:15)?

The way the Church relates to the world reflects its faithfulness

The Gospel call to imitate Christ offers its clearest image at Golgotha. The world encounters the Son of God in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Not in the Temple. Not in the courtyards of the Temple precinct where the wise and learned debated spiritual matters and decided matters of Law. Nor did the world find God's Kingdom in the wealth and power of the palace of the Roman Procurator or the pompous King Herod the Great.

This is why Paul said in Corinth that when he was preaching the Gospel to the poor he *became poor*, he brought the Good News of God's love for them wherever they were, in whatever circumstances they found themselves living. He put aside the expectations and sensitivities of the rich and powerful and Corinth and became as Christ-crucified for the poor. It was in doing mission this way that he converted the City to the Gospel and saved the rich and the powerful, the movers and shakers of Corinth – and they changed the world.

Therein lies the "sin" of which our Gospel speaks today. Not theft or lies; not bribery or adultery; not murder or slander and not one of the millions of politically correct breaches of protocol we can make in today's "enlightened" world. It is the failure to go out to those same poor and marginalized to whom God is sending us. If they are not number one on our pastoral, financial and evangelical activities and plans, we need to be rebuking each other and highlighting our failures, all with an eye to recapturing our enthusiasm for God's work. If the *marginalized* are not in our pews, on our visitation lists, central in our planning meetings and first in our outreach, then as a faith community we are sinning. This is Matthew's tough and uncompromising language but it reflects the missionary priorities of Jesus himself.