

The Gospel readings for this year's lectionary are chosen from St. Matthew. Last week we have Matthew 16.21-27; this Sunday it is 18:15-20. We skip the famous discourse of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. That is a bad arrangement. Mathew chapters 16-18 are known as the 'Discourse of the Church.' As his death becomes more and more prominent, largely due to fierce opposition, Jesus turned His thought to the preparation of a community in the persons of His followers. He has already mentioned Peter would be the principal witness upon which the church/community would be built. The lectionary leaves a lacuna; this Sunday we immediately jump into church discipline or judgment on the recalcitrant. It is a wrong approach to these few chapters on the inner life of the community of faith as though it is all to do with authority. Before we consider the disciplinary practice we first look at the church's special concern for the little ones and the lost sheep. Every effort must be tried to win back those who are in danger of being lost.

When we come to 18:15-20, different churches interpret it differently. Suffice to say, it does not imply that the church has the right to forgive and retain sin arbitrarily, but in accord with the preaching of the Gospel, which invites all to repentance and forgiveness. Nor does it imply that the church can speak God's final word, that they may bind beyond hope of divine loosing and loose beyond fear of divine binding. That is not implied in v.19, where Jesus speaks explicitly of a binding and loosing *in heaven*.

What is meant is that the exercise of such disciplinary powers in the church, in accord with the preaching of the gospel, is not a merely ecclesiastical measure adopted by the church to protect itself as a social institution. It is a sign of the final judgment which the Gospel proclaims and which is already present in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Often we tend to think that there is no real connection between 18:15-20 and the previous two sections, though Jesus was still speaking about the inner life of the community of faith. However, we should regard 18:15-20 as providing an institutional commentary on Jesus' Parable of the Lost Sheep: a Christian who believes himself

ill-treated by a fellow-Christian must try to reach an understanding privately first; only if that fails may other members of the church be involved, and then only in such a measure as is strictly necessary to secure agreement, the aim of the whole process being to keep the issue confined and to bring to bear the least weight of public pressure capable of doing the job. Only when public pressure fails to reconcile can the question of sanctions arise, and then only of one sanction, expulsion from the church, because the essence of the offence has been to reject God's judgment in the community, and so, in effect, to reject Christ himself. The only judgment with which the church has to reckon is the final judgment, dividing between belief and unbelief. By embracing the final judgment of God, Christians have accepted that they have no need for penultimate judgements to defend their rights. In other words, we do not go to secular court to settle any church affairs. The secular authorities deal only in provisional and penultimate judgments. The continued presence of such judgments in the world, however, is an important witness to us to whom the word of final judgment has yet to come.

Now, in the time of the church fathers, the church formalized its penitential order into a practice of judgment formed towards the reconciliation of the sinner. Together with 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:8, it points to a conception in which the act of exclusion from the Eucharist was the sign that attempts to reconcile could go no further. To say that the form of this judgment was the search for reconciliation is not to say that the only purpose of it was that. It served the church's need to make a public distinction between right and wrong; but this was to be done by confronting the offender and inviting him in penitence to join the church in making this distinction. By drawing the line in this way between sin and holiness the church hoped to summon every sinner back to the communion table to confess with it Christ's death for sin as the only basis of its righteousness. Should it fail, and the sinner be excluded, the line drawn was a kind of standing invitation to think again and to return.

The Gospel is not the Gospel unless it speaks of pardon, and most particularly when it pronounces judgment. Pardon and judgment are not opposed poles, between which the church must vacillate, but are

complementary aspects of the way truth impinges upon falsehood. The exercise of discipline as elaborated in Matthew 18:15-20 declares the desire to speak this word of pardon clearly. The patristic church devised a ceremony of reconciliation by the laying-on of hands for the reception of those who had previously been the object of excommunication. This does not imply any hesitation about pronouncing judgment. Repentance, after all, is the acceptance of God's judgment upon us, as we see both it and its object in the cross of Christ. What is implied in the passage is simply the avoidance of premature publicity, a desire to hold back the final manifestation of the kingdom which will allow no more time for second thoughts. Yet even in this private dealing, the church, in the persons of its two or three, is still acting as the church, bringing the authority of the ascended Christ to bear upon the falsehood and sin which it confronts. That is the plain implication of 18:19-20, to make judgment present in reconciliation is the church's proper activity but, when it is opposed by stubborn impenitence, it may defend its public life by maintaining the same authority in a different way: it may invoke public judgment.

In short, let me reiterate what I said at the outset, this passage is a commentary of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. In other words, the community of faith must bear the marks of its master in willingness to search out the sinner and to forgive in the spirit of reconciliation.



