

I'd like to take as a text, a verse from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. "All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us a ministry of reconciliation."

After 30 years of preaching, there aren't many gospel passages on which I haven't preached, but the one set for today is one of them. I've always been put off by two things. Firstly, the way that the gospel writer here St. Matthew has Jesus talking about the church. Jesus says, the passage begins, "if another member of the church sins against you". Well, I don't think Jesus would have put it that way, because the church didn't actually exist until after his resurrection. And then I'm a bit uncomfortable with the reference to Gentiles and tax collectors. The rather dismissive tone that we have here seems at odds with the way that throughout the gospel, we see Jesus dealing with Gentiles and tax collectors.

But anyway, I've come to put those discomforts to one side today, because I want to focus on the gospel passage for today because Jesus here talks about a very important topic, conflict, and Jesus lays down some very important principles about how we deal with conflict. And I want to just briefly unpack some of those principles.

The first principle is this, don't avoid conflict. As an Englishman, I'm conditioned to avoid all conflict. And in fact, all embarrassing situations, but that's not good. I admire here in this passage, the natural matter of fact way that Jesus approaches the topic of conflict. He knows it's part of life, every aspect of life, family life, church life, national life. Conflict is common to every area, and the principles that Jesus applies here, and sets out, can be applied to any one of those areas. When I'm counseling couples who are about to get married, I always include early on in the course a session on conflict. And what I try to get across to them is the fact that the goal isn't to do away with conflict, the goal within a marriage is to know how to handle conflict well, and positively, to find it as an opportunity for growth.

A friend of mine once told me about a time he'd been rafting down the Zambezi river in Zimbabwe, and the guide who was guiding them got them to put on all their safety equipment. And then he said, "One more thing," he said, "If the raft turns over, don't swim to the calm waters at the side of the river, stay in the middle of the river where it's more turbulent." And so my friend, who

was a bit alarmed to hear this, said, "Well, why stay in the turbulent bits? Why not head for the calm bits?" And the guide said, "Well, the water is still over there, it looks calm. But actually that's where the crocodiles are swimming."

It's easy to head for the calm waters, but sometimes we're called to stay in the turbulence. It's as we stay in the turbulence that we can find the possibility of reconciliation, and everything I'm saying today is to be couched within the context of that great biblical theme of reconciliation.

There are many of us here at St. James, a couple of dozen, who are part of the Sacred Ground course. And those of us on that course are learning at the moment, the wisdom of this first principle of not avoiding conflict, and the subject matter for this rather challenging course is race. And someone might think, well, why are a bunch of white people in a predominantly white neighborhood doing this thinking about race? Doesn't it affect us perhaps too much here in La Jolla. But we're coming to the realization that this is a conversation we need to have. It's a topic we need to be engaged in. We need to hear the stories and the experience of people who are not white. And I'm becoming more and more aware of the privilege that I've enjoyed because of my whiteness. And conversely, some of the hardship endured by my brothers and sisters who are not white. Yes, I could avoid talking about race, but I've come to see this as a topic that I can't avoid any longer. Yes, it's complex and problematic. But to avoid it is to head to the calm waters, and to accept an unsatisfactory status quo.

The second principle that Jesus sets out here is about taking the initiative. There was a football about a soccer manager called Mick McCarthy. He was the manager of the Irish soccer team, and he was famous for having a spectacular falling out with his star player, Roy Keane. And the journalists were obviously interested in this. And one of them asked Mick McCarthy about the possibility of a reconciliation between the two. And Mick McCarthy said, "I'll speak to Roy again, so long as he makes the first move." Well, you not be surprised to hear that as far as I know, there has been no reconciliation all these years later between Mick McCarthy, and Roy Keane. If any conflict is to be resolved, if any progress is to be made, then someone has to make the first move. That's why Jesus says, "If someone sins against you, go and point out the fault

when the two of you are alone." Don't wait for them to apologize, he's saying.

And the third principle that Jesus sets out is at the end of the verse that I just read: "Point out the fault when the two of you are alone." That is, face-to-face. That might not always be possible. It's certainly never the easiest. But it's normally the best way of addressing conflict.

I'm about to say something which I never ever thought I'd actually ever hear myself saying. One of the things I miss about England is Prime Minister's Question Time. You know, that time in parliament once a week, when the Prime Minister comes to the dispatch box and takes questions, first of all, from the leader of the opposition. And you'll know it's a very rowdy and boisterous affair, some might even say childish, but the speaker is always having to shout, "Order, order." And I realize that that can seem rather peculiar from this side of the pond. But what I like about it is that it involves face-to-face communication. The Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition are just a few feet apart, about as far as I am from the camera recording this sermon. And our politicians over here don't have that same opportunity so much for direct face-to-face communication. Much time is spent talking past each other, normally via social media, which is not a form of communication in my opinion which is very good or helpful when it comes conflict resolution.

What Jesus is encouraging here is that we sit down with those who have hurt us, with those whom we disagree. And we engage directly, face-to-face, and this preserves the dignity of the other, the one with whom I'm upset. It stops us going behind their back, and slandering. It gives us the opportunity for a private, honest, and dignified conversation. Jesus is calling here for discretion, kindness, and care.

And I need to point out that it won't always be us who's initiating the difficult conversation. It may well be that we're the ones who've upset somebody else, who've caused the conflict. It may be that somebody comes to us and says those dreaded words, "We need to talk." How do we react when we hear that? Do we get defensive? Or do we try and brush off and minimize the subject that they want to talk about? I know that's my natural response. But if we grasp what Jesus is teaching in principles here, we should respond to such an approach with thanksgiving, and be grateful that

someone has treated us with the respect to open up a difficult conversation, and offered the chance of reconciliation.

And as I draw to a close, I want to share what struck me as I prepared the sermon this week. And it was this thought, that God himself has followed these principles that Jesus sets out in our gospel passage, in his dealings with us. We can read the Bible story as a story of God reconciling us to himself. That is the theme of the biblical text. We read at the beginning of the Bible about how sin has entered our world, and led us, and all humanity to be estranged from God our creator. The relationship between God and His creation was broken by sin. And left to our own devices, we are unable to find peace with God. The Old Testament sets out humanity's predicament and problem. God recognized that sin was a problem, and He was not content to watch his creation drift away from Him to be tainted and spoiled by sin. So God acted. God took the initiative. We see in the gospels that God came in Jesus Christ to restore the relationship that sin had broken.

And the cross of Jesus is at the heart of the New Testament. It is presented as the self sacrifice of Jesus, which deals with the problem of sin by taking on the burden of sin, which separates us from God. Jesus brings us into a new relationship with God. As St. Paul says in Colossians, "In Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And through him, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of the cross." In Christ Jesus, God came amongst us, face-to-face, to heal what was broken. Through him, we can be reconciled to God. We can enjoy peace with God.

May each of us know that peace, which only Jesus can bring. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

Thanks be to God.