**6 September | 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 18:15-20 | Reconciliation**

The correction of the sinful member of the church is directed against sin in general (not ‘against you,’ which is not original to the text). The first step taken is one in charity that gives no publicity to the sin or sinner; it must be done privately to save the sinner’s honour and to maintain the family atmosphere that is the mark of Matthew’s idea of church. There was a trend in the early church to restore the Jewish legal system, but Matthew has several striking correctives. He believes that the sole motive for Christian corrective can only be the good of the Christian brother or sister. If a second step has to be taken, involving a witness to support the corrector’s viewpoint, the aim is not to convict but to convince.

The third step is a calling together of the whole local community. If their judgment is rejected, then excommunication is all that is left. The wording of the formula is shockingly Jewish and exclusive, and not from Jesus himself but from the later church. It reflects the synagogue ban against the Christians, and the strict Jewish community out of which Matthew’s church grew. But we can give it a Christian flavour by remembering that Gentiles and tax collectors were the object of Jesus’ constant concern and mission. That one has failed to grasp the hand stretched out to save is quite different from the hand pushing someone under. The hand always remains open to take the offender back to full communion in the community.

Reconciliation and forgiveness of sin lie in God’s mercy; it is foolish for us to set limits on our willingness to forgive others. Only after communal consent and prayer does the Father, as head of the family, give approval to the separation from the community. When two Christians gather around the person and words of Jesus (in prayer) then Emmanuel/God is with them; the Father hears his Son, the risen Jesus, in us.

**13 September | 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 18:21-35 | Forgiveness**

The key word is forgiveness. Peter is generous by Jewish standards with his seven times, a figure of completeness. But Jesus declares a radical forgiveness without limit. Matthew does not even have the offender asking for forgiveness as Luke does. Only when forgiveness is practiced without limit will the avalanche of sin be stopped. The story belongs to a time when rulers gave tax collectors the right to levy taxes. 10,000 talents is an impossible amount, the wages of a labourer over 150,000 years. We may well ask how important one would have to be in the Chris¬tian community of Church to have a debt as large as that? Only its highest and most prominent leaders could have such a huge debt to God! The attitude of the Unforgiving Debtor shows that he is in denial of the position of all as servants of the Lord, all experiencing mercy at the hands of our heavenly Father.

The servant is without hope for he has cut himself off from his only conceivable existence before God, an existence as servant under pardon, mercy, and grace. He refused to pass the pardon and mercy he has received on to his fellow servant. We must not forget that this entire chapter is addressed to the disciples/leaders in and of the Church, in Matthew’s day and our own. Its themes of good pasturing/shepherding, not giving scandal to little ones who have angels before the face of God, of mill stones tied around the neck of scandal givers, of plucking out eyes or cutting off limbs in preference to giving scandal through lust for power (cf. Matt 5:27-30 and 18:6-9), this chapter has a frightening relevance to our own scandal-torn Church.

**20 September | 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 20:1-16 | Parable of the workers**

It is often said of parables that what we hear in a few minutes probably took hours in the discussion and arguments that followed. To this we might add that the saying “Where you have two rabbis, you have three opinions!” could well apply here. If we shift the focus from ‘the Labourers in the Vineyard’ (a frequent OT reference to Israel) and call it the ‘the Generous Employer’ we may be nearer to the heart of this most puzzling of parables. It follows the story of the Rich Young Man and Jesus’ promise of reward and family to all who have left everything to follow him. In the time of his return (eschaton), there will be great reversals: those who have ‘lost’ everything for Christ will ‘find’ everything in Christ. The great reversals of a mysterious God are beyond our understanding, and the reversal of human understanding is why Matthew gives us this parable here.

Jesus’ opponents criticized his preaching to toll collectors and sinners; they criticized his disciples for their conversion of gentiles. Reversal of fortunes comes from God’s generosity. Like the parable of the Unforgiving Debtor, we are faced with the choice of living our life under justice (pay what you owe me, a day’s wage = one denarius), or God’s generosity. God chooses to be generous to the most needy. Those at the eleventh hour are ‘idle’ because they are unemployed through no fault of their own. They are not lazy. So often in the exodus story, the Hebrews ‘murmured’ against God over food, water, their leaders. God’s goodness to Israel, the poor and needy, the gentiles called into God’s reign at the eleventh hour, you and me, these are all signs of God’s generosity and reversal of human values.

**27 September | 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Matthew 21:28-32 |**

**Parable of the two sons**

This parable is part of the fifth and final great teaching block in Matthew’s gospel-the discourse on the end times. It is a devastating condemnation of the religious leaders. It refers to the vineyard, traditional symbol of Israel. It points to those they considered as irreligious being better than the professionally religious. Any system based on separation has to be called into question. The parable is placed near the end of Jesus’ life where it dealt with the two reactions to Jesus within Judaism. It is posed as a question to leaders, starkly contrasting words and deeds. It deals with Jewish and Gentile sons only at the later time of the Gospel writer, but in Jesus’ day it put the question of unbelief in himself as the root of refusal on the part of the leaders. Jesus is challenged over his mission to outcasts. True repentance comes from consciousness of sin, not of virtue (the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke, or here perhaps even being Matthew’s version from the oral period of telling what became in Luke the Prodigal Son).

The parable belongs in the context of the debate between Jesus and his opponents about the source of John the Baptist’s authority. The chief priests and elders are revealed as less responsive to God’s prophets, John and Jesus, than the dregs of Jewish society had been. The leaders are compared to the son who said ‘yes’ to the father but failed to carry their principles through in practice. The heavenly origin of the ministry of both John and Jesus and the effect they had on some surprising and marginalized people is emphasized.