

A sermon preached by Emma Hodge on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023 at St. Michael and All Angels Church Sandhurst

Our Gospel Reading is about how to deal with differences between people and that's why today's theme is "Resolving Conflict" but the word conflict here also means disagreements and differences of opinions.

Conflict happens, it happens in families, in friends, in work, in churches, they can be big or small.

For example, Ken read earlier from the King James version of the bible which some people love for the poetic language but others hate it as they feel it is too old fashioned and hard to understand

And Sue read from the Message version which is also loved by some for the use of contemporary language and hated by others because it is a paraphrase version and was not a true translation.

As this is the informal service you can expect some interaction so I will warn you but as conflict can be personal, I'm not expecting anyone to share anything.

I want you to think of a time when you were involved in a conflict,  
Who was it with? How did it get resolved? Did anyone help you resolve it?

I'll give you a few minutes to think about that.

I hope you've all managed to think about those questions and have thought about a conflict situation you have experienced.

There are two key principles in resolving conflict, the first is acknowledging and confronting the conflict and the second is about reconciliation.

The gospel gives us some instructions on how to deal with conflict but before we look at the reading in detail it is worth spending a bit of time looking at the verses that come before and after it so we understand the larger picture and don't take the verses out of context.

"Previously in Chapter 18".....

Jesus tells the disciples to value Children and the parable of the lost sheep. Passages about people being welcomed and valued by God.

I don't know if you noticed but this was the theme that was picked up by our first song where it is clear that everyone, no matter who, are welcomed by God and members of His Kingdom.

Further on in the chapter we have a message about Forgiveness but that is next week's passage and sermon so I'll leave that to John White to explore.

When we look at the passages in detail and as a whole they describe how to live as a community of believers, in other words, how to live as a church and it implies that they are serious differences of opinions. However the teaching applies to all areas of our lives and is not restricted to church life.

The chapter starts with an important reminder – to welcome and value everyone, the chapter draws attention to children, who in that community were not as valued as they are today, however the instruction does not apply only to children. There are several passages in the bible where we are instructed to love others, for example our reading from Romans we were told to “Love one another with mutual affection”.<sup>1</sup>

Today’s gospel reading is in a lot of ways different, and may seem that it does not keep this in mind especially when the passage tells to treat people who think and behave differently as they would a gentile or tax collector, both groups of people that a lot of Jewish people would try and avoid and not spend time with or value their views.

---

<sup>1</sup> (Romans chapter 12 verse 10)

However, Jesus teaching was that we are to treat everyone with respect, to welcome and value them. Jesus did not just teach it, but he lived his teaching, he associated with the groups and people most Jewish people avoided.

So we are told to welcome people but also to acknowledge that some people have different views.

Jesus knew that he would need to provide teaching and practical advice about how to deal with conflict and certainly history has shown this to be true;

In only a few short years after Jesus death and resurrection one of the first differences appeared, the church would argue about if Christians needed to be circumcised to be true Christians which was settled at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts Chapter 15 on this).

And this was just one of the controversies that have been debated and discussed over the centuries, In the sixteenth century, there would be a well-known controversy commonly known as the Reformations and in more recent times there have been controversies in the Church of England about if divorced people should be allowed to

remarry in church, the role of women as members of the clergy and the current ongoing debates about same sex marriage.

We may not be able to resolve some of the big or theological controversies and debates but in our everyday lives, we all face conflicts,

- Conflicts with family members
- Conflicts with friends, with work colleagues
- Conflicts with other church members

So in the context of loving and valuing everyone how does the bible tell us to deal with these conflicts and disagreements.

**Firstly** we have to remember the message of the preceding verses, everyone is welcomed and valued by God, and that we need to love one another (note there are no get out clauses here – we are not told to love one another except those you disagree with. This is consistent with other teaching found in the Gospels, for example in the Sermon on the Mount we are also instructed by Jesus to be peacemakers as we will be called children of God.

**Secondly**, and this is not an easy part, especially if you are like me you want a peaceful life and try and avoid conflict as much as possible and want to “keep the peace” and avoid “scenes”

It’s not the message of the passage.

It doesn’t solve anything.

It doesn’t help in the long term as it a pretence and as such false as it pretends the problem isn’t there

And more importantly it doesn’t lead to reconciliation,

we have to, acknowledge that there is a difference and that we need to speak to the person.

We need to reconcile and work for peace, and this is not easy, it is easier said than done but if we are to live our lives according to Jesus’ teaching then reconciliation is important as it leads to peace.

Then we need to move onto the next stage and speak to the person we have a difference on a one to one basis.

This is never easy, I know, I'm doing it at work at the moment, having to have conversations with one of my direct reports about their work and I need a lot of prayer to get through the conversations and make sure their performance improves.

The reading comes over as if you are right and they are wrong and there are situations where this is clearly the case, for example in my situation at work, I have to confront someone due to poor performance, but we should also acknowledge that there are times where both points of views can equally be valid and here I am thinking of some of the more complex theological discussions that have gone on throughout the history of the church (and are still going on). Discussions which cause hurt and pain on both sides as both sides believe that they are right.

It is worth noting that this is not just instruction it is a discussion. If someone's behaviour is challenging and their viewpoints are not the same as yours then bearing



in mind the message that everyone is valued and seen as a child of God then you need to listen, to understand and then to help them understand why you feel their viewpoint is wrong

If after we have talked to the person on a one to one basis and nothing has changed, there has been no reconciliation then we need to move onto the next stage and that is to ask for help from other members.

However we need to exercise care, and this links back to the first point of showing mutual affection to one another.

The care that is needed here is not to seem to dominate by strength but instead to have witnesses, for them to be able to phrase things a different way, to support and encourage both sides so that reconciliation can be achieved.

To avoid dominating practically it can be that both sides bring other people, so that reconciliation can be worked on, both at the time face to face and also behind the scenes.

Managing and resolving conflict is not a quick or an isolated task it also links into reconciliation and a key part of reconciliation is forgiveness which is next week's theme and following verses from our gospel reading from Matthew chapter 18.

We are all different, however we are all made in the image of God, we are all loved and valued as God's children. Putting God's teaching into practice to resolve conflict, to be peacemakers and to as we were told in our Romans reading (message version) to "Be good friends who love deeply"<sup>2</sup>

If we remember this we can work to resolve conflicts and to lead to reconciliation

Amen

---

<sup>2</sup> (Romans chapter 12 verse 10)