

Today's gospel reading is a slightly puzzling one: it doesn't really seem to be Jesus speaking; words like 'witnesses' and 'sustain any charge' don't sit convincingly on his lips; and, in any case, there were no Judeo-Christian 'communities' when Jesus was alive. Disciples only came to be called 'Christian' in 1st century Antioch. Perhaps these instructions were attributed to Jesus to reflect what was happening in the very early Church. In any case, whether Jesus himself spoke them or not, there is a point here that shouldn't be missed. "Treat them like pagans or tax-collectors" appears to be a punitive command – until, that is, we remind ourselves how Jesus himself actually treated them.

In Mark 7:24ff, a Syrophoenician woman begs Jesus to cure her daughter, who has an unclean spirit; after saying that the children's food shouldn't be given to the housedogs, he does indeed heal the girl. Now, the word 'housedogs' is important, because it means the kind of dog that lived in the house with the family and was petted and made a fuss of by the children – and not the working dogs that lived outside. So Jesus is actually teasing this woman, who is from Phoenicia in the Roman province of Syria; in other words, she is a pagan.

Tax collectors were held in particular contempt and considered to be traitors, because they collected taxes from the people on behalf of Rome; their wages were paid by the Roman authorities, so this was how they earned their living. Yet several times Jesus made a tax collector the main character in a parable: in Luke 18:9-14 two men go up to the

temple to pray; the tax collector goes home at rights with God, but the Pharisee does not. The Lord's story commends the virtue of humility – and it uses a despised person to do it. So, now, when we read in today's gospel that we should treat our unreconciled brother or sister like a pagan or a tax collector, we uncover a whole new – and very different – perspective on it.

The last three phrases of the gospel – about binding and loosing on earth and in heaven, about two or three disciples agreeing something in the Lord's name, and the Lord being in the midst of them – actually seem to be taken from different gospel passages elsewhere and drawn together in a single theme. That theme *is peace, reconciliation and agreement with one other*. This was especially crucial in the early years, because the followers of Jesus began to be persecuted first by the Jewish authorities, then by the Romans. The fledgling Church was struggling to survive... and I believe that this is the outward, historical situation reflected in today's gospel reading.

And yet it has an inward dimension too, perhaps of a far deeper significance for us. You could say, truly, that every part and passage of all four gospels speak to our inmost selves, to our secret heart. This, primarily, is where the richness and depth of the wisdom of the gospel is to be found: within. With this in mind, looking through the lens of self-understanding, however basic it might be, teaches us

that the gospel speaks to us in today's reading in particular, of peace and reconciliation *with ourselves*.

In Matthew 12:22 Jesus said that a house divided against itself cannot stand; yet for so much of the time, isn't this what we are, divided against ourselves? In other words, we do not have inner peace, or reconciliation with those parts of us within that are at war with each other. The world is full of war, conflict and division, because human beings are full of war, conflict and division within themselves. Yet Jesus said: "Peace I give you, my own peace I leave you: a peace that the world can neither give nor take away." (John 14:27)

What is this peace? Well, in the first place, we have to say that peace is not simply an absence of conflict – it is far more than that. Peace is not actually an absence at all – it is a presence, just as light is not an absence of darkness. Authentic peace does not mean never knowing inner turmoil or strife again – it means accepting the turmoil and strife but finding something deeper beneath it. My brother, in one of his solo Atlantic crossings, once told me that his boat heaved and dipped between walls of angry water twenty feet high on either side; and yet, even as he wondered whether he would get through it alive, he also understood that, way down in the lower reaches, beneath the noisy fury of the surface, the ocean was still and calm and silent. Thank God he *did* come through it alive. The metaphor is obvious: sometimes even just the daily labour of living with ourselves and who we are, is like a rough sea crossing; yet beneath the passing flux,

however stormy it may be, there is a deep and abiding stillness. This stillness is the presence of the Lord, with us and within us; in that presence, my heart and his divine heart and the heart of the world around me, are not separate or divided: we are one. There is great peace in this understanding.

The most well-oiled key to unlocking the gates of peace within us so that that it can flow and flood our soul is *self-acceptance*. True self-acceptance heals the wounds we inflict upon ourselves through thinking we aren't good enough, or unworthy, or second-rate, or somehow of less significance than others – an absurdly impossible thing in God's eyes. This kind of acceptance reconciles the parts of us that are at war with each other. Like every three dimensional being, we cast a shadow... and we have to accept this – I mean *truly* accept it. However, accepting it does not mean living it out but, rather, owning it, taking responsibility for it, and holding it up to the light of God's love. Self-acceptance and self-indulgence cannot occupy the same space, for they are contraries.

It is often very painful to face aspects of the shadow, even though they hold the key to our spiritual wellbeing. There was once a man – a decent, hardworking, caring individual, active in his local community and his parish – who, after much difficult soul-searching, had to recognize and accept his deeply-buried racism. The crisis came in his local supermarket when he found himself utterly unable to join a queue where the checkout operator was a young woman of

colour. He told a friend: “Shockingly, I realized that I did not want her black hands touching my groceries.” With appropriate help he worked hard on himself and did indeed offer it to God, whose grace enabled him, in the end, to accept that the racist tendencies were within him, without in any way living them out. He was drawn into a healing circle of compassion firstly for himself then, subsequently, for others. Self-acceptance enabled him, in the end, to taste the peace of Christ that the world can neither give nor take away.

Peace is not faith or belief and it is definitely not certainty; it is a conviction of heart, that our self-inflicted wounds can be healed by self-acceptance, calming our inner storms. Inevitably and wonderfully, this means healing the wounds of others and calming their inner storms so that the children of the Lord may live together in mutual understanding and respect. I think this is what today’s gospel is all about.