

In our gospel reading today, Jesus has some instructions about how Christians ought to behave. Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone... If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

It's an escalating series of responses, but look how it begins: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." If you have a grievance—if your fellow-Christian is gossiping about you, or spreading false rumours, or cheated or defrauded you, or in some other way has done something to upset you—Jesus tells you to go and talk to the person directly. Address the problem in private, face-to-face.

There are two major effects of following this instruction. First of all, if you go talk to the person privately, you're not publicly shaming them. You're giving them a chance to change their behaviour without subjecting them to the court of public opinion. Now, Jesus' instructions do involve taking the matter to the whole community if that becomes necessary, but it doesn't start that way. It starts with a private conversation between the two parties.

The other effect of meeting face-to-face is that you can't be anonymous. You can't hide behind anonymity or a vague "some people think..." You have to be honest and speak for yourself.

These instructions can be hard to follow. It's painful to hear someone say, "You have wronged me." It's often painful even to look someone in the eye and say, "You have wronged me." Many of us, especially the conflict-adverse, would rather skirt around the issue, avoid talking about it, sigh and roll our eyes and leave passive-aggressive notes, hoping the other person will get the hint. We stew in our resentment until it is insufferable, until it boils over in some spectacular way.

But Jesus is telling us how Christians ought to behave: we should be honest, forthright, direct. Being direct isn't the same thing as being rude or harsh, though it may feel that way. Being direct means standing behind what you say, not relying on anonymity or passive-aggression to get what you want. Being direct means addressing a disagreement face-to-face, looking the other person in the eye. As Christians, we are called to address disagreements in this way, directly, honestly.

Through this whole passage, Jesus is telling us how Christian community ought to be, how we ought to treat each other. We fall far short of that standard. When we should speak to someone directly, how often do we instead complain behind that person's back? When we should speak honestly about a disagreement, how often do we exaggerate to support our case, on the one hand, or silently stew in our resentment, on the other? When we should resolve a conflict one-on-one, how often do we enlist allies to our side to gang up on our opponent?

The instructions in Matthew 18 challenge us to be better, as individuals and as a community. They challenge us to be more honest, more forthright, fairer. They challenge us to resolve our conflicts and disagreements in a way that is difficult but, ultimately, healthier and more Christian.

I said earlier that being direct isn't the same as being unkind. And likewise, love is not the same as "niceness." Loving one another doesn't mean avoiding conflict. Loving our neighbour requires us to be honest and forthright. Sometimes, loving our neighbour requires us to address disagreements.

Paul goes on to say, "Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably, as in the day." Let us live honourably, as in the day. Let us live our lives in a way that is honest and forthright. No complaining behind someone's back, no gossiping or bullying, no anonymous complaints. Rather, we should live with integrity and consistency, willing to speak the truth and stand by what we say.

To me, this is the core of the readings we've heard today. We shouldn't act and speak one way in private, and another way in public. We shouldn't act in a friendly way towards someone, while disparaging them behind their back. We shouldn't offer anonymous criticism we aren't willing to say directly to someone's face.

Living this way, living honourably, as Paul says, is not easy. We all fall short of it. But we should still aim for this standard. We should strive to behave this way not only because Jesus told us to (though that is a good reason in itself), but because of what Jesus says at the end of today's gospel reading. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

What Jesus says in Matthew 18:20 is that Jesus is in the room with us. Wherever we are gathered, Jesus is there. Jesus is here with us when we worship. Jesus is with us when we sit down for a council meeting, or when

we gather for Bible study, or when we go out to do service in our community.

Even when only two or three people gather, Jesus is there. When you stand face-to-face with the person who has sinned against you, when you look in the eye of the person with whom you have a disagreement, Jesus is right there with you. This is one of those truths that is both a blessing and a challenge. Yes, Christ is present with us—thanks be to God! And yes, Christ is present with us—so we really ought to act like it.

As Christians, we are called to a high standard of behaviour. We are called to behave honourably, to be forthright, to address conflict directly and fairly. It's not easy. And Christ is present with us. When we try, Christ is present. When we fail, Christ is present. When we succeed, even a little, Christ is present.

Where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is there among them. Christ is with us. Let's try to live like it. Amen.