

## Disciples in community

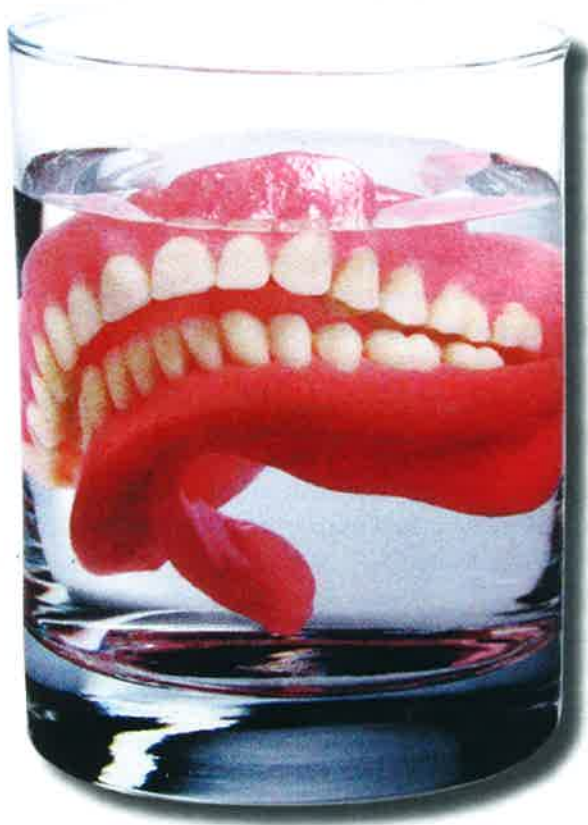
In the 1850s, a reasonably well-to-do local farmer from the place where I grew up in Ireland went on holiday to Glasgow, and came across false teeth for sale in a pharmacy. False teeth were still very much a novelty at this date, and they were a pretty primitive set – just vulcanized rubber and wood, with the tooth bits painted white. Nevertheless, the farmer was entranced. He had a set fitted and came home talking to anyone who would listen about the joys of being able to eat a tomato again. The next Sunday, he went to the local Presbyterian church where he was an elder, and waxed lyrical about the pleasures of his new false teeth.

Within a month, the church had split into teeth and no-teeth Presbyterians. The theological issue was whether it was a violation of the natural order established by God to make artificial teeth. If God had wanted us to have dentures, the argument went, then he would have made us grow wooden teeth when the real ones fell out. Nonsense, said the other side. Why did God give us the gift

of imagination and ingenuity if not to dream up a set of false teeth? The argument was long and serious and they never really resolved it. To this day, the two congregations remain entirely separate, meeting for worship at opposite sides of the town. But I confess, I've never dared ask which of them are the pro teeth party and which are the anti.

We sometimes have the idea that right at the very beginning of its history, the church was a case study of perfection. Ever since then, we think, it's been slowly unravelling like the sleeve of a jumper until we're left with what we have now – a slightly ragged and compromised organisation.

Matthew uses the word *ekklesia*, which we translate 'church', at only two points in his gospel. One of them is here, in a passage about what to do if you disagree with a fellow-disciple. It seems that conflict between members of the church has been there right from the start. The Body of Christ has a shadow side.



In a way it's understandable. Get two human beings together in almost any circumstance and sooner or later they'll talk about what frustrates them. It's just as true of those of us who are Christian disciples. We get annoyed at each other of course, at the little quirks and personality traits that other people have which seem designed to get under our skin. We get really irritated at the mysterious incapacity of other Christians not to see that we are obviously, incontrovertibly right. Many of us are frustrated at the structures of the church, which someone once described as having the engine of a lawnmower and the brakes of a juggernaut. Others of us resent those who lead and who always seem to get it wrong. And sometimes tiny, inconsequential things just irritate us out of all proportion. I once had a visitor come up to me after a service almost spitting with fury because the coffee we served after church was too weak.

This passage from Matthew offers us three paths through the forest of resentment and frustration, though they may seem a little odd at first. The first is this: get it in proportion. Look around at the other members of the church, particularly those who irritate you most, and remember how much God loves them. God loves them not because they are so noble and perfect, but because they are so lost and little. And he loves you for exactly the same

reasons. You too are one of the “little ones.” (Matthew 18:10-14)

People sin, Matthew says, and communities are made up of sinning people. So the second path is this: be mature. If you are convinced that you have a genuine grievance when you have looked at the issue carefully and – as far as you can – without bias, then go and address it face to face with the other person involved. If that doesn’t work, involve some other members of the community. This isn’t a way of gathering witnesses to attest how badly you’ve been treated. But it is a way of including the wider community who will inevitably be affected by any dispute.

If that fails too, then the issue is serious. “Let them be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” (Matthew 18:17) At first this seems fairly decisive, and a mandate for kicking the offending person out of the community. But think of the way Jesus treats Gentiles and tax collectors. In Matthew 9:10-13a, Jesus is having dinner at Matthew’s house and many tax collectors and sinners come and join them, much to the disgust of the Pharisees. When Jesus hears them complaining, he says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Jesus doesn’t tell his followers to treat people who sin against you in the church like the Pharisees treat tax collectors and sinners. He isn’t asking for exclusion. Rather, he says, approach someone you’re arguing with more carefully than you would before. Seek them out. Try to embrace them.

So the third path is this. Be prepared to forgive, even if it hurts. It’s so easy to protect and nourish our resentments; to dig a little patch for them and water them carefully. Peter is quite brave when he questions Jesus about a limit on how many times he forgives. “As many as seven times?” he asks anxiously. (Matthew 18:21) Jesus’ reply is actually a way of saying, “Forgive as much as you need to and don’t keep a record.”

We sometimes get idealistic about the church as a community like something out of *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name. But it’s actually much closer to the dysfunctional vestry from the *Vicar of Dibley*. The challenge is that it’s made up of people – people who can be difficult, selfish, infuriating and unreliable, but yet are our fellow disciples. Authentic community is hard to come by, but Matthew reminds us that it’s worth working for – because when we are gathered in Jesus’ name, however hard it is, he is right there in our midst.

## **Read Matthew 18:10-22**

### **Notes on the text**

This chapter has begun with the disciples coming to Jesus to ask, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' (18:1). Jesus' answer focuses on the character of those who live under God's rule: humility. Jesus then talks about what disciples do when they live together under God's rule.

#### ***Each disciple is important (18:10-14)***

In every community it is a challenge to care for every person, to leave no one behind, to ensure the well-being of the least and last. In these words, with emphasis on 'these little ones' and 'one ... has gone astray,' Jesus challenges his disciples to care for every disciple because each disciple is profoundly loved by God. Even if a disciple goes 'astray' we do not have an excuse for neglect.

#### ***Quarrels can be sorted out (18:15-17)***

Even a community of disciples, a church, will find that relationships break down. Jesus outlines a three-stage process for restoring relationships. First an attempt should be made by one to address the issue with the other. If required, the next stage in today's terms involves someone

as a 'mediator' and another as a 'support person' in order for the conflict to be resolved rather than exacerbated because further misunderstanding occurs.

For most conflicts in the church these two stages are sufficient. But occasionally a further stage is proposed by Jesus: the matter is addressed by the whole church. We may then wonder about 18:18-20. These verses say that the church – disciples meeting and working together in Jesus' name – is invested with power and authority by Jesus to make decisions. In this case, a decision reached at the end of the third stage is a binding decision.

#### ***Forgiveness is required (18:21-22)***

When one disciple sins against another, the question arises of what the hurt disciple does about the sin. Peter understands that he must forgive his fellow disciple, but asks how often he needs to do this. It is a fair question because it is reasonable to expect someone who offends us to learn from their mistake and stop sinning. Peter is quite generous as he allows that he might need to be patient through seven occasions of being sinned against.

Jesus' answer must then have been a shock, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times' (or, according to a variant reading, 'seventy times seven'). The parable of the

unforgiving servant that Jesus then tells reminds Peter that God's forgiveness is infinite and so our forgiveness of one another is also to be unlimited (18:23-34).

Two further points are worth noting. First, Jesus does not envisage that his disciples will be disciples in isolation, each forging a path of sturdy independence. His disciples will be together in mission, they will become 'the church' (*ekklesia*, the people God calls to meet together). Being a disciple involves following Jesus in the company of other disciples, working out how to foster harmonious relationships when sin, conflict and failures arise.

Secondly, Jesus makes a major promise in the course of this teaching, 'For where two or three gather in my name, I am there among them' (18:20). Disciples follow Jesus. When Jesus is no longer physically present with his disciples, still he is with us. We do not walk alone. When we meet together in Jesus' name to work out our life in community, he is among us.

## Questions

- What surprises you most about this passage?
- What are the sharpest challenges you face being a disciple with other disciples?

- How does this passage help?
- What difference does meeting with others make to your experience of Jesus?

## Prayer together

- Spend some time in silence reflecting on what is challenging and encouraging in this study.
- As appropriate share requests for prayer together.