

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
BE QUICK TO RECONCILE

*“If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone,
between your two selves” (Matt. 18: 15).*

The call of a prophet in Israel at the time of Ezekiel was an undaunted and risky task. The stories of Jeremiah’s experience as “a daily laughingstock and everybody’s butt” (Jer. 20: 7) readily comes back to mind as we read last Sunday. Elijah was so scared of Jezebel, Ahab’s wife and queen, after his prayers and invocation led to the slaughtering of four hundred priests of Baal, that he had to run for his dear life to Horeb, the Mountain of God (1 Kgs. 18: 20 – 19: 18). The main reasons were because the prophet of God was “a sign of contradiction” in the midst of the people. He was called to speak the Word of God to all peoples, the little no less than the great; “to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1: 10). In today’s First Reading (Ezek. 33: 7-9) Ezekiel is addressed by God and appointed as “sentry to the House of Israel.” To be a “sentry” means to be a “watchman.” He was assigned to be a moral gadfly and social compass correcting and pointing the people in the right direction. But more than these, Ezekiel was bound to speak God’s Word as directed, when directed and to whom it was directed without minding whose ox is gored under the pains of being held “responsible for the death” of the sinner, should he refuse to communicate same. This has remained and still is the burden of the Church in the society and of her priests, called to be ministers of the Gospel. We are called to be God’s messengers, who have the duty to live and speak the truth to all men “in season and out of season, welcomed or unwelcomed” (2 Tim. 4: 2). By extension, this is the call of every Christian: we are to be “the salt of the earth and light of the world” (Matt. 5: 13, 14). Please pray for your priests to be holy and courageous preachers of the word. Our world today needs brave witnesses, who teach by examples and in word.

St. Paul, in the Second Reading (Rom. 13: 8-10), presents love as the motif of obedience of all the Commandments. Where there is love, obedience becomes easy: it becomes an honest expression of that love. For Paul, love is the oil that lubricates the Christian community and energises all actions. If and when we love sincerely, we cannot sin purposely against each other. This is the reason the love of neighbour is the bedrock of all human relationships and interactions for Paul. Let us love genuinely, unconditionally and selflessly. Then we shall have a peaceful community, a loving society and a more tolerant world.

In the Gospel (Matt. 18: 15-20), Jesus reminds us of the importance of reconciliation with one another. The theme of love highlighted by Paul flows seamlessly into the gospel message: for true love enhances and nourishes this

relationship in so many ways. Love makes honest relationship possible and easy. For where there is love, there are no offences that cannot be pardoned, no hurts that cannot be healed, and no sins that cannot be forgiven. With strings of love, let us weave the messages that the Lord has for us in this Gospel passage:

1. **Be Quick to Reconcile:** “If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves” (Matt. 18: 15). The urgency intended by Jesus is almost palpable here. Jesus demands that we seek reconciliation with alacrity and in haste. There should be not time to waste. It is interesting that it is the offended who is asked to make the move. Sometimes, we wait for the offender to come around. The story of Genesis comes to mind here: God did not wait for man to ask for forgiveness before He promised that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3: 15). St. Paul expressed a similar need when he exhorted the Ephesians: “Do not let the sun set on your anger: do not give the devil the opportunity” (Eph. 4: 26-27). The worst thing to happen is to brood over an offence. When this happens, the devil takes control of our minds and aggravates our anger and lures us to violence. Notice the emphasis on one-on-one. Face-to-face fraternal dialogue is the best because it is personal and sensitive to the dignity of the other. Only love compels us to make this first step, and love causes our brother/sister to listen, to agree and to make amends. As St. Paul says: “Love does not hurt” (Rom. 13: 10).
2. **Once is Not Enough:** Reconciliation is so important that, where it fails at the first attempt, Jesus teaches that “once is not enough.” A second approach is recommended, whereby we “take one or two persons along.” Apart from the legal requirement of the tenability of the evidence of two or more persons (Deut. 19: 15), this is to help the process of negotiation and reconciliation. Where this fails, Jesus put forward a third option: “report it to the community.” The desire to win back a brother/sister must be irrepressible and pursued with loving tenacity. It is expected that members of faith-community would be able to persuade and convince an unwilling heart to see reasons and the need for reconciliation. Where this also fails, the last action is to “treat him like a pagan or a tax collector.” This last part is often difficult to understand what Jesus really means. It probably means to set him free from our hearts and give him the space, without any grudges or malice. On our part, we should forgive, love and be ready to welcome him/her back anytime there is a change of heart. Where there is love, this is easy to practice.

3. ***Love, Forgiveness and Prayer Are All Tied Together:*** Jesus says: “I tell you solemnly again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by My Father in heaven” (Matt. 18: 19). Here Jesus points out that there is an intrinsic connection between love and forgiveness and answered prayer. Mutual agreement is founded on love, which enhances forgiveness; these two concomitantly, facilitate common intentions in prayer, which pierces the heaven with such power and grace that God cannot but bless it with His favours and abundance.

My dear friends, in a world polarised by multifaceted complexities, we need Christians who are prepared to be true witnesses in word and in deed. Let our lives speak the language of love, which is the language of the gospel to all mankind. It is life’s reality that someone will always offend us, as we will always offend others. Therefore, we must never forget that we can be on either side of the situation at any time. At whichever side we find ourselves, let us put on the garb of love and humility and readily seek to reconcile with one another, and be open to be reconciled even more readily.