

23rd Sunday of Year A

The theme for today centres on the need for reconciliation between individuals and in the wider community. Jesus outlines a process of conflict management.

On the plane coming back from Sydney on Wednesday I tuned in to the greatest hits of Simon and Garfunkel - `Homeward Bound` , well I was, wasn't I?, `I am a rock, I am an island` and the old favourite, `Bridge over troubled water`. That song centres on reconciliation, a recurring theme today. It is said that the duo had frequent spats, a characteristic of many artistic groups going back to Gilbert and Sullivan. The song was an effort by Paul Simon to repair the damage caused by one such rift - `Like a bridge over troubled water I will lay me down.`

One of the least desirable traits of modern life is an all-pervading atmosphere of aggression – aggression in the home, aggression on the road, aggression in the marketplace – and even conflict in the church.

It may surprise us to realize that Jesus dealt with conflict management , but in fact he did.

All the readings for this Sunday hinge around this theme. The 2nd Reading from Romans emphasizes the need for mutual love among Christians and this of course is the other side of the coin .

The word of God opens today with a passage from the Prophet Ezekiel on the duty of correcting others: `Son of Man, I have appointed you as watchman for the house of Israel`. It is a watchman's duty to look out for trouble. Jesus usually referred to himself as the Son of Man and perhaps it was this passage that inspired him to speak as he did in the Gospel. It is precisely because of the prevalence of aggression in society that this area is a veritable minefield. We know what happens to courageous people who try to correct boorish, anti-social and destructive behaviour in public. Often the results are fatal for those who intervene. No wonder people try to pass by on the other side. Even those who are paid to protect people from domestic violence and the like, such as the police and social workers do nothing at times. How many children have died because of the pussyfooting of the latter?

Only the saints seem to have been able to put the gospel into practice in this regard. For example when the Carmelite founder St. John of the Cross was superior of a community he once reprimanded one of the friars. Many years later when John was very ill he asked to be sent to the house where this man was now himself superior. Needless to say the opportunity for payback now presented itself to this friar and he took it up enthusiastically. He treated John with the utmost harshness and resented or refused to buy medicines that would alleviate Johns' painful ulcers. Before he died John called the community together and asked forgiveness of the Prior for all the trouble and expense his sickness had caused. The moral was that even this Prior was shamed at witnessing this kind of holiness and he himself asked for forgiveness. I mention this story to show how even supposedly religious people can find it hard to forgive and forget. Its relatively easy for parents to correct their children – at least when they're young, but it's a different matter to point out to ones peers the error of their ways. It has become obvious in the church in recent years that in many

places Bishops have shirked the responsibility of correcting their priests with the resultant epidemic of child abuse.

It has now become apparent that we are called to engage in a process of reconciliation in regard to flash points in the life of the church community.. We heard in the gospel today that Jesus himself outlined such a process of reconciliation. If the initial one to one approach doesn't work, then he advises enlisting the help of some go-betweens or mediators. If that too breaks down then it becomes a matter for the whole church community. Obviously the stakes are now higher and if the offender remains obstinate, the unity of the church is threatened. The whim of one person – no matter how strongly that whim is held on to - cannot be allowed to jeopardise the unity of the community.

One example; the new translation of the missal has aroused mixed feelings among various members of the church. To take one of the least controversial changes – the word `anxiety` has been changed to `distress` in the prayer after the Our Father`. Now for myself I can't see much difference between the two words and I don't see the point of changing them. However if it costs a million dollars to reassemble the various committees involved in the translation in order to change it back , I think I would let it go. There comes a time when my individual preference may have to give way to consensus and common sense. In areas like these we are all called to build a bridge over troubled water.

The final words of the gospel today, whereby Jesus promises his abiding presence with his followers, are what gives me most hope in this as in everything else. This promise has its primary application to this Eucharistic gathering today. `For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.