

Sunday Collects, Readings and Reflection
6th September 2020 13th after Trinity

*Our church is open every day for private prayer.
Until we can all meet again for public worship,
you can also use this sheet in conjunction with our recorded service
which you can find here <https://youtu.be/MJpRGeNJVRs>
on the Christ Church Shamley Green YouTube channel
or via the link provided on our website www.shamleygreen.net*

COLLECT

Almighty God,
who called your Church to bear witness
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;
through him who was lifted up on the cross
and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.



FIRST READING

Ezekiel 33:7–11

The word of the Lord came to me:

7 So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel;
whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.
8 If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,'
and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways,
the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand.
9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways,
the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.
10 Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel,
Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us,
and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?'
11 Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD,
I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,
but that the wicked turn from their ways and live;
turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

GOSPEL

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus spoke to his disciples.

15 'If another member of the church sins against you,
go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.
If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.
16 But 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.
17 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.
18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask,
it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.
20 For where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.'

REFLECTION 'Love means...' The Revd. Sally Davies (*Watch in our recorded service*)

One of the strangest things Kevin and I did this summer was to attend a wedding via Facebook (with everyone appearing to be lying on their sides in the church until the bride's brother got the camera the right way round). The small number of guests allowed to be present and the scaled-down party in their garden afterwards did not diminish the couple's very evident joy in making their marriage vows to each other. Weddings always remind me of my own fourteen years ago. They have been good years but I hope that I have not become what Bridget Jones in her diary calls a "Smug Married". Kevin came to see the first Bridget Jones film with me and two girlfriends. Was this an early sign of the true love and devotion to come? going to see a chick flick in the company of three women? I have tried to reciprocate in going to London Irish's rugby matches and although I still have to have the rules explained to me, it's the thought that counts and my thought is "Love means being interested in what interests your beloved".



Of course in the even more famous film classic "Love Story": "*Love means never having to say you're sorry*". I always wondered whether it should really be "love means being ready to say you're sorry", realising that love does not somehow inoculate us against wronging or hurting those we love. Indeed because our love for them and theirs for us leads us to trust them and share our life closely with them, we are often more likely to hurt or frustrate them because we are our-selves with them. The marriage vow which says "All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you" is a double-edged gift: it is a wonderfully romantic and loving thing to say and to offer and at the same time really quite formidable. As Kevin now knows, I have given to him all the weak, fearful, selfish and not very nice aspects of myself; I hope he knows and enjoys the best of me but he has certainly also encountered the worst of me and this is always going to be the case in a true marriage, one that is "for better, for worse". I had to trust Kevin and his love for me enough to make those wonderful yet profoundly scary vows and I had to love him enough to receive the gift of all that he is in turn, his best and worst self.

However, this does not mean that we will necessarily like or want to live with the worst of one another most of the time. I know that Kevin loves me 'just as I am' (another quotation from "Bridget Jones", we really are going to get to the Bible soon, I promise) but love really doesn't mean never having to say you're sorry; love means being able and willing to recognise the worst of one's own self, to be sorry when that hurts someone who loves and trusts us and being ready to do whatever we can to heal that hurt and prevent its repetition. It likewise means honouring and loving others enough to confront and challenge *their* worst selves when we encounter them. And this is where we finally intersect with this morning's readings because these are very much about the reality of love and life together. They offer an initially daunting, certainly challenging, yet ultimately encouraging glimpse into another Love Story, that of God and his people.

It sounds at first quite judgemental and distinctly dangerous: people set up in judgement and authority over one another and, moreover, made morally responsible for confronting unacceptable behaviour in others. How big a risk is God taking here?! Surely nothing could be more guaranteed to bring out the worst in us, all our potential for self-righteousness, hypocrisy, scapegoating and prejudice! Reading these passages in the context of contemporary debates and divisions within Society and Church is enough to make me want to run away back into the pages of Bridget Jones... And yet, all is not quite as it at first seems. Just as the marriage vows are double-edged so too here there is rather more going on.

God's commission to his servant in Ezekiel 33 to act as a sentinel, watching over the people and warning them to change their wicked ways lest they suffer and die as a consequence, ends with these words: "As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live." God's aim is not judgement in order to make people

suffer: to punish them, be revenged on them or make their life a misery. Rather his aim is life, his desire for them is life, his pleasure is *in* their life, "life in all its fullness" as Jesus once said. That's love for you: tough, passionate, unwilling to accept the worst of people as the last word on them and strong enough to challenge and call out the best in them. And if our aim when we confront or criticise others is any different, then it is not love.

Jesus makes it even clearer in this morning's gospel. He begins by carefully setting out how such confrontation is to happen: with consideration and respect for the other, with absolute fairness and with the safeguard of drawing in others both to act as witnesses and to share the responsibility. His judgement, "if the offender refuses to listen... let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector", sounds harsh, Gentiles and tax-collectors being the pariahs of that society, beyond the pale of the membership of God's people. Yet this is where we have to remember that *Jesus* frequently associated with those very pariahs, visited their workplaces, ate with them in their homes, drew them in to his company, friendship and service, and saw himself as a physician, bringing healing and life to those most in need of it. If those who offend against *us* are to be like that to us, then this is not a case of condemning, punishing and excluding them but rather a restatement of the commandment to love, "for better for worse, in sickness and in health", actively seeking out the better side of those people and promoting their health.

And this is all to be done in Jesus' name and in his presence: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We do not act in isolation, we do not love in isolation. Just as the marriage vows are made "in the presence of God" and the wedding rings are exchanged "within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit", so all our relationships are to be lived out in that context, with that same inspiration and with those accompanying checks and balances. For God's love, which is both the source and the model for our own love, is a love which knows the best and the worst in us. And the story of his love for us is one in which he is always seeking to love the best in us into being and flourishing, and to love the worst in us into repentance and forgiveness.

So a new maxim for all who seek to love and be loved, in any relationship or context: "Love means bringing out the best in one another, and bringing the worst to God for transformation".

FINAL PRAYER

Almighty God,
you search us and know us:
may we rely on you in strength
and rest on you in weakness,
now and in all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Common Worship: Additional Collects)

BLESSING

God the holy Trinity
make you strong in faith and love,
defend you on every side
and guide you in truth and peace
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
rest upon you this day and remain with you always. Amen.



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