

Sermon Notes for Trinity 22

how oft shall my brother sin against me? (Gospel)

It is rather easy to jump over some words as if they could not have any importance. I propose to take the words “my brother” seriously. Peter then is not asking a general question, but one specific to the situation of the Twelve. (I think we can ignore the possibility that he means his brother after the flesh, Andrew.) He recognises that some sort of fellowship exists and that this imposes more stringent obligations. One might indeed say that Judaism itself was such a fellowship, for they were all in one covenant with God and so might have obligations to each other that were not universal to all the world, but even within Judaism there could be brotherhoods (the Pharisees were like this).

Now Jesus does not slap this line of thought down on the basis that no such brotherhood was in his intentions. This is significant because of the widespread idea that he did not found a “church”. True, the word is rare in the gospels, but the fellowship of the new covenant is inherent in what he does. So there is indeed a relationship of brotherhood and the question is what the obligations are. Peter, I suppose, takes the hardly surprising view that brothers should not wrong each other (one might expect that from gentiles or even negligent Jews, but surely we are better than that). But they do. There must be, from the very nature of the gospel, a large element of forgiveness. So, how much?

The answer, as we all know, is not 490 times, even though that is what the text says and there is a teasing possibility of an Old Testament reference. It means that we are not in the business of counting. If there is any repentance, the Church cannot abandon a sinner, even after many lapses, however convenient this might be in worldly terms. If (for instance) child abusers are abandoned by the Church, it can only be because they do not repent but rather seek to justify and continue the sin. While there is repentance, ministry has to be continued.

But the passage does not end at this point. We have something rather uncommon in Matthew (much more typical of Luke) the extended parable or novella. Some scholarship thought that these pieces were not authentic, but later constructions. I do not think we have any evidence for this. Nobody with any sense thinks that Jesus had only one way of teaching. Various ways of teaching were available; we need strong evidence to rule any of them out of consideration.

He switches, then, from the brotherhood to the household. It is not a huge change (and we will see that the household image informs the nature of the brotherhood). This is (as with the prodigal son) a large household with, probably, blood relationships and paid servant relationships which go far beyond the merely commercial. Servants are not equal, but they are all part of the household. It has a head, who has authority over it. It is a household, and there is one rule in it which runs from top to bottom. What applies between a senior servant and the head must also apply between junior servants and senior servants. How could it be otherwise?

How are we meant to apply this? Jesus does not expound in detail, but it is safe to draw out the implication that his Father has dealt with the Twelve (or the disciples) on the basis of forgiveness (and not of justice, else all were damned as “unprofitable servants”); so they must do the same to each other. (Is there a hint to Peter that he should not presume on any superior status? I do not know, but it is not inconsistent with other passages in Matthew.)

Small as the brotherhood is, it can and will grow, but always on the same rules as at its beginning. Blake is, as not infrequently, perceptive:

“Mutual forgiveness of each vice, Such are the gates of Paradise.”

One important point which again is often jumped over. “His lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormenters . . . so likewise shall my heavenly Father do unto you”. God is not soft. If we will not learn the lesson of forgiveness and apply it, we must expect the lesson of judgement to be applied to us. We are not told whether it is possible to “pay the uttermost farthing”. Better not find out! The caution applies especially to us, who may have reason and are certainly tempted to believe former brethren in the state religion have wronged us.

Even then, the rule is only spoken of as applying within the brotherhood. But is it universal? What are the implications outside the brotherhood? That question is not answered in this passage. But elsewhere in Matthew there are clear arguments from the Father's universal benevolence. Maybe there are greater duties to the brethren; this does not deny duties to everybody, to fellow human beings just because they are that in the sight of God.