

We thought last week's gospel was the tough one, didn't we? About taking up the cross! Well, to tell you the truth, this week's gospel makes taking up your cross and following Jesus look a whole lot easier, because here Jesus lays out just what he means when he says, "Take up your cross."

We are reminded that to belong to the Church is to belong to a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. This means that being a Christian is not a private, purely personal affair, although that is the way some people seem to behave. When God asked Cain, "*Where is your brother?*", Cain answered, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" The teaching of the Gospel is that indeed I am responsible for my brothers and sisters.

Not only that, our relationship with Jesus, with God, depends intimately on how we relate with other people – be they members of our own family or complete strangers. Elsewhere in the Gospels we read: "*By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" and "*As often as you did/did not do it to the very least of my brothers and sisters, you did/did not do it to me*".

Today Jesus says, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Take it to others, and the whole community if need be, cast him out as a last resort"

Though how, you might ask can such a final decision be squared with Jesus' openness to sinners, including corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes, or with the story of the Prodigal Son? But Jesus' reception of these people was not unconditional. It depended on their change of heart and the abandonment of their sinful ways. Jesus sat down with sinners, not because he liked them more than good people but because he hoped to lead them back. When he forgave the woman taken in adultery, he told her to "sin no more". The Prodigal Son was received with open arms after he had decided he no longer wanted to live his life of debauchery and, by his own decision, came back to his father.

It may be in the interests of both the community and of the individual that, if he/she persists in anti-Christian behaviour, that he/she be separated from the community, and the situation, obviously, can be changed by a change in

the attitude and behaviour of the wrongdoer. Once he repents and converts, he will be – indeed must be – received back with joy. We must always have in the back of our minds that Jesus went out of his way to heal and reconcile the outcast. Jesus’s mission is to create committed communities of believers that will witness God’s love to a battered and broken world.

Congregations are communities of people. They usually function well, but all of them, from time to time, have conflicts that arise between members. One expert in church conflict resolution, identifies levels of conflict which range from “Level One: a problem to solve,” to “Level Five: intractable situations where personalities have become the focus and energy centres on the elimination of the persons involved.” In this extreme condition, it is often necessary to bring in an outside person to deal with the explosive situation. In unhealthy churches, people often create a toxic triangle made up of the victim, the persecutor, and the rescuer. Then it becomes more difficult to resolve a condition or address an issue. It is hard avoid getting triangulated and it isn’t always possible. However, try we must, because once the triangle is established, conflicts are left unresolved.

Every faith community has its own style of life that is built into its identity and history, and it can be difficult to change if it is unhealthy. We know stories from the Book of Acts that the Early Church experienced a lot of tension and disagreement, even among its apostolic leaders. But there stands that wonderful reassurance “*Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them.*” God desires us to be in community, whether small or large. Being alone is not necessarily bad, but it can lead to isolation and arrogance. Our God is a God of relationships, a dynamic force that empowers our spirituality and grounds us in faith. The Trinity models what our relationships are to be: fully in unity and desiring of diversity.

God came among us, as a flesh-and-blood human, to be with people face to face. Imagine the healing power present in the moment when Jesus looked Peter in the eye and said, “*Peter, do you love me?*” When he cupped in his hands the face of the woman caught in adultery and said, “*Your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more.*” When he healed the man born blind and the first thing the man saw was the face of Jesus looking at his own

with eyes of love. When he appeared, face to face, with the women outside the tomb on that first Easter morning and said, *“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*

The face-to-face encounters of Christians with Christ were not to end when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. One of Christ’s gifts to us is the gift of community, where we meet our brothers and sisters heart to heart, spirit to spirit, and face to face. Christian community is that place, that way of being, where we know, and are known by, the Love at the centre of the community: God, a life-giving, sacrificial, persistent love that calls us to reach beyond ourselves, to realize we are connected, woven together into one body, the family of God. Together, in Christian community we can share grief and joy, sorrow and victory, sadness and celebration. The gift of Christian community is about togetherness, realizing that we are all connected

C. S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, imagines hell as a vast grey city. It’s a city inhabited only at its outer edges with rows and rows of empty houses in the middle, empty because everyone who once lived in them has quarrelled with the neighbours and moved, and then fought with the new neighbours and moved again, leaving streets of empty houses behind them. That is how hell got so large, Lewis says. *It’s empty at the centre and lived in only at the distant fringes because everyone in it chose distance instead of confrontation as the solution to wrongs done against one another.*

Hell is the absence of community, the impossibility of reconciliation and the pain of emptiness.

Jesus recommends bringing people face to face, front to front, to talk and hear about what is going on between them. It seems to be not only the best way to stop the spread of hell, but also the best way of following Christ. Jesus says our relationships with each other are worth it. And he should know. He went to the cross, to take on our sins, to wrestle them away from us, rather than say they don’t matter. He was willing to die and even come back so that we might be reconciled, so that we can come together face to face. So, the least we can do is go, sit face to face, talk, listen, go back

some more, bring more faces, more ears, let the person know they are so precious, we're not letting them go easily.

What about when people refuse to acknowledge their sins, change their ways, come back into the house? What if their continued presence in the family would be harmful? Well, then, says Jesus, "*Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*" Yes, they should be treated as those who are on the outs, those who are outside the family. **And here's the twist: those are the very people Jesus made a special focus of his ministry.** He reached out to them with the message that they could turn away from sin, they could come home. Indeed, Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Someday, we hope to know the joy of seeing God face to face, without fear or shame. In the meantime, we can turn face to face with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and meet Christ who promises to be present when we meet face to face in his name.

But of course, that's not as easy as it sounds, and we know this. We often fail, even in the best of circumstances – or more accurately, in what we know should be the best of circumstances. But this is life. Gossip happens and people are wronged in many different ways. We all make poor choices at times. We're human; life here will never be perfect.

But the bottom line is: "*we should look after one another and be honest with one another*".