

It was after the first murder recorded in the scriptures – a fratricide – that the Lord asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain’s reply remains a byword even today: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”

Cain’s defiant question in reply to the Lord leads to many other questions. What responsibility do we have for other’s actions? When is it right and proper to respect others’ freedom to make their own wrong choices? When are we obliged to bring others’ bad behaviour to light? What is the best way to approach someone who we believe needs challenge or correction? For all the discussion that has gone into these matters, useful answers are hard to come by.

In his time the prophet Ezekiel broke new ground with his insistence on individual responsibility – responsibility for one’s own actions and, as we hear today, responsibility “to warn the wicked to turn from their ways”. Matthew’s gospel suggests a process to be followed in the community when a “brother does something wrong”. No stranger to problems in Christian communities, Paul spells out the fundamental principle: “Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour”.

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel

33:7-9

The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows, ‘Son of man, I have appointed you as sentry to the House of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, warn them in my name. If I say to a wicked man: Wicked wretch, you are to die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked man to renounce his ways, then he shall die for his sin, but I will hold you responsible for his death. If, however, you do warn a wicked man to renounce his ways and repent, and he does not repent, then he shall die for his sin, but you yourself will have saved your life.’

First Reading

Today’s reading is not the first place in which Ezekiel’s mission is identified in terms of his being a sentry for the house of Israel. The Lord calls him to this early in his career (3:16-21), a summons that is developed further in 33:1-9 from which we hear today.

The prophet’s responsibility to call the wicked to “renounce his ways” is a serious one. It is not a matter of whether the wicked person repents or not, but whether the prophet has sought to warn him of his erroneous ways. The success or failure of this mission is not the point. What the prophet will be held accountable for is delivering or not delivering the warning that the Lord has issued.

The Lord’s charge to Ezekiel is couched in absolute terms – life and death are at stake. There is no room for grey in this black and white picture. Members of the congregation might wish to hear something more nuanced but this is not what we have. Readers will need to proclaim this text with the gravity it demands. A serious tone and a measured pace are called for.

In the NRSV the language is inclusive. Whether “mortal” is an adequate rendering of “son of man” is a matter of dispute.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 94:1-2, 6-9

R. O that today you would listen to his voice!
Harden not your hearts.

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord. R.

Come in; let us bow and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand. R.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
‘Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.’ R.

Responsorial Psalm

The response and verses of the responsorial psalm for today, and much of the commentary, are the same as those for the Third Sunday of Lent. In this case Psalm 94/95 has been chosen to follow through on the theme of warning from the first reading.

The reader will note a distinct change of tone between the first two verses and the third verse. The first two are full of enthusiastic praise and thanks for God, creator and redeemer. God is saving rock and shepherd for his people. But the third verse turns into an ominous warning. God chastises his people, remembering their hardness of heart in the desert. The response – “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts” – is adapted from this part of the psalm.

The abrupt transition from praise to rebuke may reflect the original use of the psalm. It may have been composed to accompany a joyful procession into the temple. Once they have entered the temple the assembled people are given a blunt warning to be ready to listen to the reading of the Torah. The repetition of the response calls the congregation to attend to God’s word.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 13:8-10

Avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love. If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations. All the commandments: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and so on, are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.

Second Reading

Having heard the introduction to chapters 12-15 of Romans last week, today we fast forward to the middle of chapter 13. The message is clear. In the few verses that we read Paul declares that all the commandments are fulfilled by loving our neighbour as ourselves.

What Paul has to say will remind us of two complementary stories in the gospels. The first records the exchange between Jesus and the scribe or lawyer. When asked which was the greatest commandment of all, Jesus replied with the two-fold command to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-34).

The second is the story of Jesus’ response to the rich man who asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus offers a list of the commandments; when the man says he has observed these all his life, Jesus bids him to go and sell all he has and give the money to the poor (Mark 10:17-22).

The lists of commandments cited by Paul and by Jesus are not identical. Readers who have the time would find it an interesting exercise to track down the multiple lists of the commandments in the scriptures and compare them for what is included or left out, what is emphasised and what isn’t.

The reading is both straightforward and attractive. It should be proclaimed with warmth.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples: ‘If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you: the evidence of two or three witnesses is required to sustain any charge. But if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community; and if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax collector.

‘I tell you solemnly, whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.

‘I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.’

Gospel

After the conclusion from chapter 16 read last Sunday, all of chapter 17 is omitted and we move ahead to the middle of chapter 18. This chapter constitutes the fourth of the five discourses or sermons that Matthew incorporates into his gospel. This one is his discourse on the Church or his Community Sermon.

It soon became evident in the life of the early Church that it was not a perfect society. Individuals sinned and communities splintered. A dispute resolution process needed to be developed. This is what Matthew offers in today’s reading. A sinner is to be approached first by the individual, then by two or three others, then by the community. If all this fails, he is to be treated like a “pagan or a tax collector” – an ironic un-Christian use of these terms, given that Jesus’ teaching and practice made such people insiders not outsiders!

Matthew adds two further statements. The first one extends to the community the power to bind and loose that had been given to Peter earlier in the gospel. The second combines two fundamental assertions. One, that when two or three agree on what to pray for, their prayer will be answered; and two, that Jesus is present whenever “two or three meet in my name”. This last declaration provides a warrant for the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on Christ’s presence in the worshipping assembly.