

See how these Christians love one another!

Tertullian, a North African theologian of the second century, in his works *The Apology*, 39.7. wrote these words – or at least a longer version!!

It's great when people can say that about Christians today, but how often have you heard it said in your hearing?!

You have a cartoon in your possession and it is based on the lectionary! Rick and Ted are two sheep who are part of their local church; Ted is a rather young sheep, and Rick is Ted's mentor. They are always pictured in conversation after church. Without fail, Rick is holding a cup of coffee. I think he has to hold on to *something* when he's talking to Ted. Today, Ted is reading Matthew 18: Ted's a loveable young thing, but he really doesn't want to be reconciled! He just wants to get rid of difficult people. As he says, *Send them directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect \$200*. But real love can't do that. Love keeps on....

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Have you heard the story about the woman who was walking along the beach when she stumbled upon a bottle...?

She picked it up and rubbed it, and 'low-and-behold' a genie appeared! The amazed woman asked if she got three wishes.

The genie said, "Nope, sorry, three-wish genies are a storybook myth. I'm a one-wish genie. So... what'll it be?"

The woman did not hesitate. She said, "I want peace in the Middle East. See this map? I want these countries to stop fighting with each other and I want all the Arabs to love the Jews vice-versa. It will bring about world peace and harmony."

The genie looked at the map and exclaimed, "Lady, be reasonable. These countries have been at war for thousands of years. I'm out of shape after being in a bottle for five hundred years. I'm good but not THAT good! I don't think it can be done. Make another wish and please be reasonable."

The woman thought for a minute and said, "Well, I've never been able to find the right church. You know, one where everyone is kind and focussed on others, where people like to help out and no one feels excluded. One where people

resolve conflicts lovingly and don't complain about trivial things. That is what I wish for ... a church without conflict."

The genie let out a sigh and said, "Show me that map again."

A funny story to illustrate the point that conflict happens within the church and it is nothing new!!

All of us do or say things that make us out to be hypocrites, people who fail... But that is ok... as long as we admit to our failures and mean it because God longs to right *all wrongs*. And God is happy to have a church full of wrongdoers who long to be righted.

That's not to say that when we do wrong, when we do wrong to each other, we shouldn't try to right it. Jesus made it clear to his followers that they should deal with people who wrong each other within the community of believers.

The Gospel prescribes a three-stage process. First there should be a personal, private opportunity for the culprit to be confronted openly with the reality of the offence. If that fails, then step 2 is 2-3 other independent people should be invited to come and listen to what is said and try to discern all the facts of the case, which can so often become twisted in the telling. Finally if that doesn't work then the whole community should be drawn into the discussion as a decision is made as to whether the wrongdoer can be restored to full fellowship.

3 things to note here... it says, *confront the problem v 15*. Don't go away and hide from it; don't go away and complain to your friends about it while doing nothing to put things right. But that is what a lot of us like to do isn't it! - We want to get people on our side...and the 2nd thing is the reason other people are there (independent people) is not to 'gang-up' on the sinner, but to *find out the truth*. As I said earlier we are tempted to place blame and to find a scapegoat, and we need to get others on our side to make that happen. But here Jesus is asking us to accept our responsibility to put things right, by inviting others to use their judgement to find out the truth.

The third note is that Gentiles and tax collectors were *outside the faith community*; this verse means that someone who refuses to repent *puts themselves* outside the church, needing to rediscover God's mercy and grace all over again.

Now the final verse!

These words are often quoted as a word of consolation to those who may feel disappointed when fewer people have turned up to a service than they expected. But Matthew is actually writing about *reconciliation* within the faith community.

Christians are called to work towards reconciliation and when that happens says Matthew Jesus is present.

You would imagine that, in the presence of Jesus himself, the disciples would have had no trouble at all with jealousy. And yet... at the beginning of Matthew 18 they are asking Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" So Jesus calls a child, has him stand in front of them and then shocks them by saying, "I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven." Humble yourself and become like this child. That is the way to enter the Kingdom."

So there is a mixture of jealousy and ambition is in the background of the passage we are looking at today and the very purpose of the Kingdom was being missed! There is no place for jealousy, ambition, deceit, anger, arrogance, control etc in the Kingdom.

Being together "in his name" means that we are his people, his representatives, those who are seeking to know and do his will...

The disciples needed to put their ambitions behind them and agree together in his name. And today we his disciples have to do the same... they failed, we fail, but if we keep trying, God will honour that...

I was at Greenbelt this time last Sunday and a friend blogged about it on the Tuesday and I want to share with you something he wrote....

It's a festival that seems to see the best in people, through their failings, their cynicism, their selfishness and provides the message that we all have the ability to do something – to make the world a better place, to help the poor, the dispossessed, the loners, the outcasts, the included, the troubled, the searching and the difficult – to see past the obvious and to recognise the potential and the good. To see past the colour, the culture, the background, the faith (or none) and take up that challenge as Christians. Mike Yaconelli a Christian author said about the communion service at Greenbelt “*For ninety minutes, the real world of hatred, prejudice, pettiness, and selfishness were forgotten. We were the invisible Church made visible for an instant, and it was truly overwhelming. For a few fleeting moments I got a glimpse of what heaven will be like and I shall never forget it.*”

Where ***real*** love is found, God is present; the church will grow in faith and hope because the greatest of these is love.

See how they love one another... do we?

Amen