



Twenty-third Sunday Ordinary Time 2005

Ezekiel 33: 7-9 Romans 13: 8-10 Matthew 18: 15-20

Today's theme is crime and punishment. It is also the favourite theme of politicians in an election year.

Ezekiel, the first prophet to receive his call in exile, was one of the deportees to Babylon around 597 BC. Ezekiel was a priest and his chief interest lay in the temple and its liturgy. He also use the phrase Son of man to refer to himself when describing his revelation from God.

Ezekiel describes himself as a watchman. In times of danger a watchman is essential. He is the one to give the early warning signal. The blast of the trumpet brooks no delay. If anyone dies it is the responsibility of the watchman. We find the same image in 1 Corinthians, "If the trumpet gives an uncertain sound who will prepare themselves for battle."

Ezekiel describes his vocation as spiritual watchman for Israel. He knows God expects him to warn of spiritual danger particularly the danger to their faith from their exile. Ezekiel has grave responsibilities to warn but of course the people are free to listen or not.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of spiritual correction. The context is important. Jesus speaks of rifts between family members. The community of Jesus is based on Trinity it is not based on a hierarchy, with members over members. All are brothers and sisters so spiritual correction will follow a different pattern from a parent child model.

This address on fraternal correction is prefaced by two very important themes; care of little ones and care for the lost sheep. Christian discipline is established in care.

Discipline or correction must not be of a kind that would give scandal to the newcomer to the group, or to the religiously naïve. This is underlined by the warning that lack of concern for the spiritually frail will bring condemnation.

The second group of people to consider are the "lost". These are to receive special treatment. It is enough that some have wandered off without their restoration being an occasion of added pain.

So having emphasised the need for discernment we are ready to reflect on the method which was probably used by the community of Matthew.

1. If the matter is between two members they should seek to work it out between themselves.

2. If the two cannot achieve harmony bring in a mediator or use a third person to ensure that each is heard.

3. If there is still no resolution then involve the local community, either a formal assembly or a council of elders. If the person at fault won't accept the decision of the elders or the group then they cease to belong to the community.

It is specifically in the prayer for unity prayed by the group that the presence of Jesus is active to heal and restore.

Having grasped the importance of reconciliation Peter asks his now famous, question, "How many times should I forgive a brother who has offended me?" and with a burst of bid-heartedness, "Seven times?"

Jesus replies, "Not seven, but four hundred and ninety times!" In other words forgiveness is not a numbers game but a kingdom sign. As God does not keep scores so we in imitation of Jesus choose love above all things.

Patricia Stevenson rsj.