

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

4/9/11

Proper 18 A

Peacemaking Matthew 18.15-20

Who remembers being told/ do you sometimes get told at school – that if such and such happens to you, you should always tell a teacher or another adult?

What sort of things does that apply to?
[Bullying, particularly....or people doing things to you which make you feel uncomfortable.]

Sometimes a teacher has to step in when people are just arguing and can't stop and make friends.

Has anyone had experience of a teacher or other adult having to get involved in a quarrel or dispute? Or perhaps you've been that teacher... Or some adults here may have had experience of a kind of third party or mediator being called in when they were in dispute ?Was it a good and helpful experience?

What can a teacher or other third party do? What qualities do they need, and what might they hope to achieve?

[Protection for victim – but also objectivity; maybe helping people hear each other – stopping a slanging match; maybe reminding everyone of what's right and wrong; helping people live at peace, feeling that things have been dealt with fairly, though that sometimes means someone has to be punished or put at a distance. But, in the best circumstances, helping people be friends, and mend broken relationships. Stopping rival camps or gangs developing in a school or community.]

People who do this job have to be wise and good at listening – and sometimes quite brave to wade into a fight. It's all too easy for people on both sides of a fight to turn on the person who's trying to help. I think the helpers are the ones Jesus was talking about in the Beatitudes, when he said '*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God*'. Some people are particularly gifted that way, but any of us may be called upon sometimes to do our best to be a peacemaker, a mediator, or at least an objective third party.

Parents have to do it lots of times, and can be quite tricky! And because it's so difficult, we should ask the help of God, to give us courage and wisdom.

Our teaching from the Gospel today was about people arguing with each other, even in the church. Ideally, of course, Christians should be able to make up with each other, and apologise or forgive each other very readily – after all, we know we're all sinners and live entirely by the forgiveness of God, each one of us, so we ought to be able to speak the truth in love – and to hear it, even if it's unpalatable!

But even though we know this, we can still find relationships difficult – we can still quarrel – we can still create bad feeling, and sometimes even churches get split up into rival camps. That particularly happens if people don't do anything to make peace, but just complain and mutter about other people behind their backs. Doing that often feels the easier thing to do, but it's not brave or right. Nor is it right to wish the people we find difficult would just go away. God wants all sorts in his church – not just those like-minded to us!

We need to ask God to help us be brave enough to talk to each other when we have difficult things to say – brave enough and loving enough. And we also need to look for the people in our midst who have the special gifts to be peacemakers when our own conversation can't do the trick – or, if not peacemakers, at least objective third parties if somebody won't budge and apologise if they're wrong, or come to a compromise if necessary.

I wonder who you think would be a good person to involve if you had an unresolved dispute with someone else – maybe even someone in the church? Who's got a wise head on their shoulders, and the ability to keep calm and help others calm down? Who can judge sensibly the rights and wrongs of a situation? Who can make you feel safe enough to say what you really feel without being aggressive so that problems can be properly aired?

I know God has put such people into our midst. We may be a pretty happy church – but we're not a perfect one (there isn't such a thing!). So let's thank God for our peacemakers, our mediators, our wise, objective people – and be prepared to use them to help us put relationships right if they go wrong.