

EXODUS 12:1-14, ROMANS 13.8 -14; Matthew 18: 15-20

Last week we began our Creation Time. I mentioned that the United States of America have withdrawn from the climate change agreement decided at a summit in Paris. Today's Gospel reading gives us useful instruction on what to do in times of disagreement and conflict that we'd be wise to heed.

Jesus tells us to speak to the person we disagree with directly. Very often we fall into the tempting trap of speaking about the person rather than to the person. This certainly doesn't help restore the relationship.

If that fails, we're to take two or three others, trusted individuals, to help mediate. If that fails, the whole church is to hear of the matter. If that fails, the person is to be treated as a tax collector and sinner. What does that mean? We kick them out and never speak to them again? No. Tax collectors and sinners were the very ones Jesus spoke to, dined with and spent time with. They were never beyond the reach of God's grace in his eyes.

This simple instruction makes it seem very easy to forgive and move on. We've dealt with the contentious issue and that's it. But I know that it certainly isn't easy. Together with Rev Macnaughton I lead a series called 'Living the Questions' through the Council's Community Learning. It's a very good group and we had a very interesting discussion on forgiveness on Thursday. We wondered whether something similar to the stages of grief could be written about forgiveness too. Having given it some thought, I don't think it's possible in a similar way because stages of grief are a natural process everyone goes through at their own pace. We all go through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; we go back through them over and over again but hopefully reach the acceptance stage eventually. This is a natural process so everyone goes through it whether they choose to or not although they'd be better off not bottling it all up.

It's different with forgiveness though. This is not a natural process. You don't simply wake up one day and realize that you've forgiven somebody – be it someone else or yourself. Forgiveness takes an effort on our part and a lot of God's grace that we need to ask for too. There's nothing natural about forgiveness. So steps to forgiveness have been identified which comprise naming the hurt, letting the feelings be felt (as opposed to suppressing them in the name of false as very superficial forgiveness) and understanding how nursing the resentment is damaging us personally before we can finally move on. Various sources would add other points to this but these seem to be the most common. Forgiveness then is a process we need to work on, we don't get there by simply being passive. In the Christian context we need God's grace to get there.

I wonder what that means in terms of the US and their climate change stance. We need to keep working with them because, as the National Wildlife Federation said, 'The United States is the **second largest contributor to CO2** in our atmosphere, though it is home to just **4.4 percent** of the world's population. If everyone in the world lived the way people do in the U.S., it would take **four Earths** to provide enough resources for everyone.'¹ We

¹ <https://www.nwf.org/Eco-Schools-USA/Become-an-Eco-School/Pathways/Climate-Change/Facts.aspx>.

badly need them to change their ways and lifestyle as they are such a huge contributor of Carbon dioxide worldwide – second only to China. What they do matters. But we need to work with them too because they are loved by God, they're part of this world and we have a duty of care to them. That's why we ask for God's grace to help us find a way to work together.

We also need to keep working with them as we've got a duty of care to the rest of humanity. It's the poorest of this world who suffer most from drought, floods, poor crops and polluted air and water. They pay the price of our recklessness. As our passage from the Letter to the Romans said today: 'Love does no harm to a neighbour.' We do harm our neighbours hence we are lacking in love. We are not reflecting God's love and light into the world.

The Bible has always been annoyingly socialist. Today's reading from Exodus gives detailed instructions as to the amount of food to be prepared. Households are told to share so that there's enough for everyone according to their needs and no waste. No waste – that's a challenge for the 21st century!

While the Israelites are in the desert the same principle will be governing their gathering and sharing of manna – just enough for everyone but no waste as it will rot.

New Testament goes further – there's enough to feed everyone in the crowds surrounding Jesus and some to spare too! What luxury! What abundance!

Always enough to feed everyone. Share if you've got too much to make sure others have enough too. Do not waste food. Last year the Mission Group showed us a film on waste. It documented a couple as they fed off the food that was thrown away from restaurants, supermarkets and shops for six months. Copious amounts of food were filmed as being thrown away every day. What a waste! But the most sobering thought was when we learned that it's the households that waste by far most food. Not supermarkets, not restaurants, not shops – us, in our own kitchens, larders, fridges.

What economy is that? What stewardship?

In many ways we are at the outset of a journey, like the Israelites were in our reading from Exodus. We do have a vision of the Jordan, of the Promised Land, but it's all very vague and we haven't seen it. What is ecological justice and balance? How does it really look like? What's in it for us?

We dread the perilous journey in the wilderness – the journey of changing our lifestyles, giving up on comfort and luxury that we're used to now. How do we know anything beyond that will be better... for us? The discomfort, the danger, the selfish and short-sighted desire to stay where we are, in the known, however unjust globally, is a strong pull. Venturing out into the unknown has never been anyone's preferred option. Venturing out into the unknown of a journey towards ecological balance and justice might mean the change in where and how we shop, where we buy houses, who becomes

our friend and/or enemy. The loss, the change, the challenge is at the forefront of our minds.

It doesn't need to take much though. Eco-congregation Scotland give us the following tips for managing our carbon footprint on the move: 'If you drive a car, do you have the most fuel efficient car for your needs? It is estimated that buying the most fuel efficient car in its class could reduce emissions by 24% and save three months worth of fuel a year. Can you find an alternative to using a car or share a journey for some of your trips? An average car commuter drives 12 miles a day and reducing this by half could save 400kg CO2 a year or 170 litres of fuel.'²

The Israelites ate the Passover meal with great fear and trepidation. They knew what they were leaving behind – security of a meal every day, work to go to, known rulers and governors. They didn't know what was ahead of them though. They knew they were setting off but they weren't sure whether it was a good move or not and where they'll end up.

That experience of the Exodus is what made them into a nation though. They've been tested, moulded, shaped and reshaped in the desert but they emerged a nation. They never ceased having conflicts, disagreements and fights but an important shift in their self-identity occurred on that journey.

Will we, the peoples of the world, emerge from this experience more united than ever? Will the single purpose and the care of God's creation make us into something we are not yet? That remains to be seen. For now words from Romans should be our guide: 'The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime (...) clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.' Amen.

² <http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Managing-Your-Carbon-Footprint.pdf>, p. 12.