

## Reflection: Jesus brings his friends – living in community

David Fotheringham, 6 September 2020

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

**Bible reading:** Matthew 18: 15-20

Guide us, O God, by your word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover our peace; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

I have heard it well said that when we let Jesus into our lives, he brings all of his friends. When we let Jesus into our lives, he brings all of his friends.

I have also heard plenty of people say that they can be Christian without being a part of a Christian community. Whilst it's true that we are each individually in relationship with God, so much about Christian faith is about how we treat our neighbours and get along with each other that it's fairly hard to see what being a Christian in isolation could really mean. Attending gatherings doesn't make us Christian - that's the opposite error – but when we invite Jesus into our lives we find that he is in other people's lives, too, and that there are some things that we are called upon to do together. In Paul's letters to the early churches he talks a lot about how we are all members of the body of Christ, with different gifts to contribute, learning from one another and sharing together in our joys and sorrows.

Christian faith, after all, is not just about God's love for me, because in following Jesus' way we find ourselves joining with others in showing God's love for the world.

This means that we are joined in a community of different people who are also Jesus' friends, with all of our differences in backgrounds and cultures and personalities. That is a marvellous thing, and a source of great richness and wisdom, but it also gets hard.

A lot of people think that Christians should never be in conflict because if we are all Christian we will all draw the same conclusions about everything, and we will all, always, treat each other according to the expectations of the other. That's obviously not the case. This passage of scripture assumes that there will be conflict. The question is just one of how we deal with it.

While today's passage focuses on the situation in which one person is sinned against by another, the principles are drawn from the wider context of Matthew chapter 18. The chapter starts off with the question of "who is the greatest", which Jesus answers by directing attention to a child, and to having a humble spirit. The chapter then talks about not putting any stumbling blocks before a vulnerable one, and paying attention to how we behave lest we or others come to harm. It then emphasises how we are not to despise the vulnerable; to seek after the lost sheep just like God does. Hence we are to seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters.

This passage gives a basic procedure to follow in the case of a person sinning against you - though the kinds of sins envisaged are not defined. It's clear that the goal is redemption, rather than punishment, even if it does mean naming the offence. There is also a call for the church to stand with and support those offended against, when the offender is unwilling to listen to boundaries. It's important to notice that the comments about "binding" and "loosing" mean that the church has responsibility in interpreting where to set boundaries. I want to note that High Street Uniting is committed to being a Safe Church, safe especially for those who could be vulnerable. If anyone has an issues about potential abuse, please don't hesitate to raise them with me or with our Safe Church Contact, Mandy Lake.

In the next few weeks and months we face some times of uncertainty as we chart a course through what is wise, and legal, and helpful as restrictions gradually ease. With a lot of people feeling pretty exhausted by the restrictions, it also means that frustrations will begin to show. Across society, while the most substantial majority are compliant with the conditions and recognise that if the virus spreads exponentially we end up with a huge health crisis and lots more deaths, there are other voices emerging too. Some are concerned about the economic impact of restrictions. Some are concerned about the loss of personal freedom. Some connect the measures with conspiracies. Some are deeply and personally impacted by the pain of the restrictions more than others, who have greater resources to draw on.

Among us ourselves, some will be more concerned about the risks and potential harm caused by meeting, and others will be more concerned about the risks and potential harm caused by not doing so. While this passage doesn't directly address this situation, for us, it does talk about talking through differences directly where possible, ultimately with the "church" making the final call - which for us is effected through the church council, and some of the wider councils of the church.

The Victorian and Federal Governments have been doing a remarkably good job to get us where we are now, with the virus coming back under control. The next steps are trickier, and it's where, at both levels of government, what we need to see is robust conversation and debate so that different perspectives can be heard and agreement on how to proceed hammered out with the greatest possible buy-in. That's why we have a parliamentary system, and we can pray that it might function at its best.

More locally, a roadmap for High Street Uniting Church will take a little while to prepare. I doubt that gatherings of more than 50 will be possible for quite a long time yet, so we may start to look at smaller gatherings in various ways. The Church Council has clear principles that we want to make sure that people, relationships, and love for our neighbour are safely fostered, and that we take account of the needs of the most vulnerable. In many ways that does circle back to the themes of the whole of Matthew 18: not just the part about speaking and listening in conflict, but taking care how we behave, looking out for the vulnerable, and not putting any stumbling blocks before them. Because God brings us into community.

When let Jesus into our lives, he brings his friends, so we need to listen to each other and look for ways to care for all.

To the glory of God.

Amen.