

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time A

Fraternal Correction

Today's Scripture readings focus on the duty we have to correct our brothers and sisters when we recognise that they are taking a wrong path. In the First Reading the Lord tells the prophet Ezekiel that he must warn the wicked person to renounce his ways. If he does not, then the prophet himself will also be held responsible for what happens to that person, says the Lord. These are hard words indeed.

In the Gospel Jesus also highlights the importance of fraternal correction, and he offers a process to do this. If a person has done or is doing something wrong, first, have it out with the person alone; if that doesn't work, take two or three others along with you; and if he refuses to listen to them, report him to the community, and if he refuses to listen to the community treat him as a pagan or a tax collector.

(Of course, we must remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. He showed great kindness and invited them to meals with him!)

Confronting another person about their behaviour is so difficult. But I think today's readings give us helpful advice on how to go about it.

Firstly, as St Paul reminds us in today's second reading, the only place from which to correct someone is the place of love. We must always be clear about our motivation for correcting someone. Is it truly to help them grow, to be a happier more whole person, or do I just want to put them down or get back at them for something? As St Paul says, "love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour." If we correct from a place of love, we will not harm the person, who may not like what we are saying but will recognise the love that accompanies the words. When we correct from a place of love, we have a care-frontation, not a confrontation.

Secondly, the importance of two witnesses. Sometimes it's better not to confront alone but with someone else. Why? To make sure that my assessment is correct and objective, that there isn't something personal going on here. Before confronting, make sure there are one or two respected others who agree with your assessment.

Some other points:

1. Always show respect: the first rule of negotiation is never to humiliate your opponent;
2. Take time to praise, to encourage, to affirm – if you have taken the time to say encouraging words to someone in the past, they are more likely to listen to any criticism you may have;

Very few people find fraternal correction easy but let us remember that there is perhaps no more loving thing to do than to correct a brother or a sister who is going the wrong way in their life. May we have the courage and, most importantly, the love to do this when necessary.

And may we also have the humility to examine our own self when others approach us about our behaviour and actions. May we be willing to listen and reflect on what they are saying in love and strive to make any amendments that are necessary.

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