

Dear Brothers and Sisters



'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he does not listen to you, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.'

How are we to understand all this? Is there to be a progressive harshness towards the one who offends us, with increasingly grave consequences? Does treating them 'as a gentile or tax collector' mean writing them off completely?

To understand Jesus' words, we need to first ask who is 'the brother, or sister' anyway? The answer is anyone at all. And what is the sin committed? That too can be anything at all. This being the case, all of us are included in this Gospel.

We have all been slighted or hurt by the attitude, actions, deeds, words, or even the silence of others. And what has been our response? To throw their sin in their face, drag them before the tribunal of the church? That would be easy, and perhaps for some that is what their idea of the church is. But it is not how Jesus thinks; for he also said 'There is one judge and law-giver, who are you to judge' and also 'If your brother sins against you seventy times seven, forgive him.'

What does it mean therefore to treat the offending party as a gentile or tax collector? We know the answer to that from the Gospels: Jesus loved them. In fact, others were scandalized that he went to eat in the house of tax collectors. Jesus dirtied himself with their sins. He himself became ritually impure so that sinners might not be excluded from the community. And to those who thought this was wrong, he had this to say: 'Tax collectors and sinners precede you into the Kingdom of Heaven.'

One of the twelve, Levi, otherwise known as Matthew, was a tax collector, as was Zacchaeus, who rejoiced when Jesus came to his house.

Jesus was heard praising Gentiles for having more faith than those in Israel. Gentiles could be esteemed in his eyes, and referred to as models to be emulated, as in the case of the widow of Zarephath, or Naaman the Syrian.

Rather than increasing sanctions and restrictions aimed at the uncooperative brother or sister, Jesus' words in today's Gospel can rightly be understood as meaning the exact opposite: if you have been offended, be willing to make the first move, and go to any length necessary to make the sinner welcome, even if that means getting the church involved.

Our parish, like any parish, is meant to be a place of refuge for the sinner, for the tax collector and the gentile. Do you know any? Why not invite them to Mass next Sunday.

Fr. Sean