

Personal relationships and good confrontation in the Church

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost +12 B – 2 Sam 18; Ps 130; Eph 4.25-5.2; Jn 6.35, 41-51

Personal relationships and good confrontation in the Church

I said at the beginning of the service that today's readings all speak about confrontation. And the Psalm reminds us of the deep water we are in. So confrontation – good confrontation – must be our theme; out of deep water and into a lifeboat. So let's do that with the guidance of our Ephesians passage today.

The letter to the Ephesians has a strong focus on relationships between Christians. Its second chapter effectively says that we're all in the same boat; that we all started in dangerous water outside the boat, and God rescued us. WCC? It's a great equaliser. If we're all in the lifeboat together, it makes no sense if any of us claim to be superior to others, or treat others badly, or if there are divisions between us. Yes *us*, because the way we read Scripture assumes that this letter is in some sense addressed to us. It assumes we've all been dragged out of dangerous waters and into the lifeboat. And our state of grace – our status as rescued people – means God should have a lot of say in how we live with all the others God has also rescued.

A Christian lifeboat-community is no place for anyone to dominate or control others. What you'd hope would define all of us is gratitude to God for our rescue; something to bind all of us together in humble joy. Does this sound like

hopeless idealism to you? Do you think this writer is naïve about human nature? *Oh no!* Today's passage contains the best-known ancient statement there is about anger management: that famous saying, *Don't let the sun go down on your anger*. What this sentence is essentially telling us is not shy away from necessary confrontation. If we've got an issue – if we've been wronged, or witnessed an injustice, this old saying means deal with it; and as soon as possible.

Letting anger fester, letting it sour relationships; letting it ruin our sleep, our appetite; letting it make us grumpy tomorrow – or even for the rest of our life – whatever way this anger shows up in us, the price of delaying resolving it can be very high indeed. So there are very good reasons for going ahead with confrontation when it's necessary, and this old saying clearly endorses doing so. But this passage also tells us that when we do confront, we are to be imitators of God. Good confrontation can be very Godly; very constructive; very healing.

At its heart, good confrontation enables two things. It enables the truth to be acknowledged, and by clearing the air, it can make genuine forgiveness and healing possible. But neither forgiveness nor healing are ever achieved by a style of confrontation which dominates or humiliates. Remember, we're all in the same lifeboat! In fact, there are specific instructions against this distortion of good confrontation;

³⁰ *...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom [we are] sealed for the day of redemption* ³¹ *Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,* ³² *and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

Those attitudes we're called to give up – bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice – are dividers; and

they're often old, ingrained fears and resentments we might carry from our past; nothing to do with the dispute we might be managing today. Today, we're being urged to choose to leave these behind and seek today's truth **together**. We want to arrive at a place of reconciliation, having journeyed well, so we're still **together** when we get there.

For me, this can begin by remembering the love God has shown in forgiving me and the Holy Spirit working to transform me. Then it seems perfectly reasonable that God asks me to give up my bad habits of suspicion and cynicism; to give someone else the benefit of the doubt like God has so often done with me.

To return to the lifeboat analogy, when we're baptised as Christians, we celebrate together our rescue from the deep waters of death. Baptism is the moment when that rescue officially happens. We record it in a book: 'today, such and such became a full member of the Church of God – came out of the deep waters of death and joined everyone else in our lifeboat'. We record it in a book, and we also write it on our foreheads with holy oil, signifying the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit moves in and spirits of fear, division and self-righteous anger are given their marching orders. We're committed to work full-time with God's help now.

We're officially a family in baptism. And like any family, the Christian Church has its uncomfortable moments – rough edges have to keep being chipped off. And day by day, we learn to live together.

It has its confronting moments. But we are called to make them healing, reconciling ones, by always remembering what God has done, and does, every day for all of us, and before the sun goes down, making sure we're ready for the next day.

Let's pray. (The prayer of St Richard of Chichester. 1197 – 3 April 1253) *Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits you have given us, for all the pains and insults you have borne for us.*

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may we know you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.