

23 Year A

Recently I have had time for some tidying up in the presbytery and some clearing out of stuff no longer needed. In checking through my files I came across my high school reports covering the years when I was aged between 11 and 18. It seems that when I was about 14 I slipped into erring ways.... (Quote some comments).

These critical remarks evoked, as you might imagine, further castigation from my father and mother, which brought home to me that *things had to change*.

The calls for my correction, for putting things right, uncomfortable as they were to receive both verbally and in writing, had a salutary effect. Ways were duly amended. Attention was paid. Work was done. And the renewed effort paid off in the time that followed after, for my benefit and hopefully for that of others besides.

For some years I was chaplain in several of our Diocesan High Schools. In one of them I clearly remember a boy who was constantly being reprimanded by various members of staff for his indiscipline and lack of application. Eventually, thanks to their persistence in caring about him, he settled down and got stuck in to the studies.

Ten years later I was holidaying on the small Greek Island of Samos. The tour rep invited the clients to meet with him on the first morning to hear about the resort and the options open to them for various trips, etc. This rep kept on looking intently at me, and I wondered why. After the session had finished he asked aloud 'Are you Fr Pat who used to be our chaplain?' Gone was the anonymity I like to preserve while on holiday – but, of course, I said I was when he gave the name of the school.

It turned out that he was the former 'teachers' trial' and he had 'made good', happy and successful in his chosen career with excellent prospects for the future. He said to me: 'I'll always be grateful to the teachers who got on to me when I was going wrong. I'd have messed up my whole life if they hadn't saved me from being so stupid.'

I remembered those two incidents when reading today's Gospel and the other readings in which we are urged to be willing to correct one another.

If we love one another we will be prepared to do that, although, of course it is far from easy.

One reason it is difficult is because we are conscious of our own shortcomings and perhaps feel we are in no position to criticize someone else. But we can be humble in what we say: indeed, we should be humble, and we should speak up out of concern for another's happiness.

Another reason why we can be slow to correct someone could be that we value the friendship or the love of that person and don't want to lose that friendship or love. This can happen between partners in a marriage, and it can happen between parents and their children. We try to avoid or postpone confrontations. We can be loath to cause upset in our relationship.

In fact, what is happening there is that our personal need is preventing us from fulfilling the duty of love we owe to those who are nearest and dearest to us. No one likes a scene, but it's better to have a few dramatic moments now than to have to share in the suffering of someone's crisis later.

The prophet Ezekiel in our First Reading reminds us of our responsibility to be 'consciences for one another'. God **expects** us to *warn the wicked man to renounce his ways*. If we do not then God will hold us in part responsible for that person's ensuing moral collapse. Moreover, we are to be like *sentries*, alert for the incursion of evil into our **society**. If we see its presence and stay quiet then we are failing in our duty - and 'evil triumphs because good men stay silent'.

We are especially called to look out for one another in the Family of Faith - as we learn from Jesus himself in the Gospel: *If your brother does something wrong go and have it out with him alone.... If he does not listen take one or two others along with you...If he refuses to listen to these report it to the community...and if he refuses to listen to the community treat him like a pagan.*

The Lord is urging us to care deeply about each other, and to persist in that care even though there seems to be little response to our efforts. He goes further: *Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven!* Again, it seems as if God holds us responsible for one another's ultimate welfare!

In some of the historically older religious orders there is still the practice of what is known as the *Chapter of Faults*. On a regular basis the community of monks or nuns gathers together and each member in turn becomes the focus of attention. It is expected that their fellows will make their shortcomings clear to them.

This is surely a very humbling experience. Not only for the people on the receiving end of whatever criticisms are made, but also for those speaking the criticism. Their turn will come! So it behoves them to make their observations as humbly as they expect them to be received by the hearer!

I have heard it suggested that it would be a good thing if our penitential rite at Mass took the form of a Chapter of Faults! We might find that very difficult to manage, and to sustain, especially in a large gathering such as this. But such practice in Religious Life has shown itself to be a very salutary experience, of benefit to each individual and to the community as a whole.

Of course, it is of key importance that the motive for any criticisms made is that of **love**, and love alone. As St Paul says in his letter to the Romans: *Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour.*

Other motives can easily creep into the unwary human heart. We can be all too ready to point out someone else's faults – especially if we think it will make us feel more comfortable with our own. It doesn't, of course, but we are prone to delusion in such matters.

Some media outlets exploit that tendency and make a profitable business out of scandal mongering and sensationalism. But what social benefit does that bring about? None – in fact it only adds to social discontent and disarray.

In the matter of our response to human faults and failings the Desert Fathers, those holy monks who lived in the wildernesses of Syria and Egypt in the late Third and Fourth centuries, had much wise advice.

For example, the Abba Poemen said: *If a man has sinned and denies it, saying "I have not sinned", do not reprimand him for that will discourage him. Rather, say to him: 'Do not lose heart brother, but be on your guard in the future. In this way you will stir his soul to repentance.*

'Instead of forcing the other to admit his failings Abba Poemen's practice is to comfort him and help him to get back on his feet. It is no use overwhelming someone by hitting them around the ears with the truth. They will only go away feeling sad, or angry, and this will paralyse them, or make them more stubborn. It is much better to encourage and strengthen and help someone to stand up straight'. (Anselm Grun, *A Path Through the Desert*, St Paul's 2003, pp37-8)

Two good people I have known have shown the wisdom of such a course of action.

One is a priest, probably known to many of you, who has done much for building up individuals and parish communities in the grace of God. His constant practice is to **commend the good efforts of those around** him. In fact he seems blind to their faults and failings. Somehow this always-positive appraisal evokes great good will and promotes earnest endeavour by all who are blessed to hear it.

And I recall a good friend I had when young in the priesthood. She was a wise and holy woman, then about the age that I am now. On one occasion when I was being particularly a pain to those around she quietly remarked, 'Well, we love you anyway!' Somehow that assertion - that I was still loved even though behaving in a very unlovely way - did more to help me become aware of my shortcomings than being berated ever would have done. It brought me up short, and made me think about my words and my behaviour, and their effect upon others.

Such is the power of the Gospel of Jesus, which wins sinners over by assuring them that they are held dear in God's heart, even if in no other, including their own. John Newton, the former slave ship captain, was rescued from the terrible actions of his worst self by just such a realisation: *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*

Correction is something God calls us to do for one another's sake. But perhaps the best way to do it is not by drawing attention to someone's weaknesses, but by pointing out their strengths. Then the good in them will grow, they will 'go right', and all around them will be blessed by all they have to give.