

If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him (Matthew 18 .15)

On Friday I was involved in giving a presentation on “developing leadership” to the Australian Human Resources Institute’s, annual conference. There were broad range of people there from many sectors of the workforce. After my presentation quite a number of people came up to thank me for what I had offered them, but over lunch they asked me about the disagreement occurring between our Archbishop and parishioners at St. Mary's Church in East Brisbane. There has been a lot of media attention to this, and the situation is clearly of interest to the wider community in the way we as a church handle diversity and disagreement .

Of course, the Catholic Church is not alone in having situations where people have differences with others in their own community. You might be aware, the worldwide Anglican Communion is struggling to maintain unity at the moment over the issue of having female bishops and homosexual bishops. Political parties continue to struggle over who they want in leadership positions. And of course most of the countries of our region are struggling , sometimes in violent disagreement, over how they can exist as nation states, despite appearing to be people of the same ethnic background.

When Matthew was recording this gospel, the early Christian community, the people following the way of Jesus, were struggling for survival. They were being persecuted by the Roman authorities, as well as the Jewish society they came from . They struggled with what traditions they should keep and what they should discard. Jesus had summed his requirements in this single statement , you must love your neighbor as yourself. He observed that Love is the one thing that cannot hurt others, that is why it is the guiding principle to every life situation. But the specifics of life require us to undergo discernment.

Matthew records this very specific and interesting teaching of Jesus for dealing with disagreement or conflict in the community. If your brother does something wrong, go have it out alone. If he does not listen, bring one or two others along with you. When two or three of you are gathered , he says, I will be with you. If your brother refuses to listen to these , report to the wider community, and finally if he refuses to listen to the communities desires, treat them like a tax collector. I must say, it sounds a pretty unusual statement to treat people like tax collectors. They were people who had broken communion with their kith and kin, and were working for the roman occupiers . But on second thought I recalled how Jesus treated tax collectors like Matthew .. He sought to get to know them , and encourage them to come back into communion.

The reality exists that we experience breakdowns in communion. People do estrange themselves by their actions. And if people are not willing to be in communion , it becomes very hard for the community to live out their mission in the world.

I can remember times when we had serious differences of opinion in this parish. I remember quite a bit of tension in relation to the funding of the refurbishment of Mater Dei Church. Different people had different views on things, but with God's help in the dialogue, we worked through the issues and grew closer together as wider community.

I remember the angst that some people had when reduced from seven Sunday masses down to four . Some people were very angry about that. And some people left. But we have continued to be faithful and we have made a positive difference in our world.

Whilst I much prefer to talk about good news, the reality is that all of us, even in families, have differences from time to time, sometimes really dramatic differences, and it's important that we have the courage to deal with them and try to restore communion. To do nothing leads to death of a community .

The bottom line for us as Christians, is that love must guide our actions. But unity, even with some diversity, is necessary for living out our mission. God has entrusted us to be agents of reconciliation. He holds us responsible to love our brothers and sisters. Acting in mutual love, we need to have the courage to dialogue with our brothers and sisters when they act in ways which damage us. Many issues would be resolved earlier and without conflict if we just used the step by step programme that Jesus prescribes- and try to talk things out with people we have difference with , before we escalate the issue by writing to the Pope or the Courier Mail !!!

We need to be the people who listen more than talk. But in the end, we are people of communion. As Catholics that is precious, very precious.

If we are going to really make a difference in the world we need to do it together in unity and in love.