

# 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Year

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Today St Paul talks to us about what he calls the 'debt of mutual love'. The Commandments set a base level of what this means but in today's Gospel Jesus tells us that we need to go further than avoiding conduct that might hurt someone. We have a positive responsibility for each other's well-being – not just physically but spiritually and morally.

It is easy to think that being a Catholic means being concerned with the relationship between God and me and that my duty is simply to "save my soul". But, in fact, the only way to "save my soul" is by becoming a truly loving and caring person as part of a loving and caring community of people united in Christ. Sometimes this may involve bringing a brother/sister face to face with the loving demands of the Gospel. We do not help each other by turning a blind eye to behaviour which is clearly unchristian.

As a community we have a responsibility for each other's wellbeing. We do not further the witness of a loving community when we, in false "charity", ignore social or problems such as drug-taking, alcoholism, compulsive gambling, violence in the home, discrimination against the physically and mentally handicapped, racial exploitation, dishonesty, backbiting, failure to play one's part in family or community life. It was Cain who replied to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Our Lord offers us a three stage process. The first is Fraternal Correction. Fraternal correction gives concrete shape to our love for each other. Why does Jesus say "go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone?" First of all, out of respect for our brother's good name, for his dignity. He says: "you and him alone," to give the person the possibility to defend himself and to explain his actions in full freedom. Sometimes things are not what they seem. An honest explanation dissipates many misunderstandings. But this is not possible when the problem is made known to everyone. However, the real reason must be to win the person over, not to score points. Our purpose should be to help him or her on their spiritual journey.

A good result does not depend solely on us, but also on how they react. When others offer us correction, the result depends very much on how we accept it. A sign of spiritual maturity and openness is to hear someone out, resist the temptation to bridle in self-defence, and accept that rightly or wrongly, something in us has caused offence. Before we offer any explanation, we should have the courage to say, "Thank you for telling me!" Giving and accepting correction in the right spirit form opposite sides of the debt of mutual love. We also need to know when it is better to say nothing, because we are uncertain of the facts, and to speak out would do harm.

However, Our Lord recognises that this may not have the desired result and does not let us settle for having tried. He recommends two further stages. If the behaviour has a wider impact than on us alone we should then enlist the help of two or three others but still in a quiet and private way. Only if this fails should we go public. To criticise someone in public is immediately to put their backs up and to expect a defensive and hostile reaction that may make the problem harder to resolve but sometimes it is necessary in order to prevent a greater harm to other people or the community as a whole. Indeed, if the danger is urgent we might need to bypass the first two steps since our duty of love is not just to that individual but to the community as a whole. Still we should never lose sight of our ultimate objective, which is to win over the wrong doer for his or her own sake.

Suppose we take a simple example – a bully, whether in school or at work or in our social circle. We may choose to suffer in silence or perhaps be afraid of the consequences but the bully is harming himself by his attitude and behaviour and may well have other victims. We do not show love for neighbour by allowing a natural fear to prevent us from doing something about it. If we know or suspect others are affected we should enlist their support and if that does not avail then we should blow the whistle to whoever can take appropriate action. In the long run this is best for the bully as well as everyone else.

