



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (6th September) 2026

Theologians often observe that the Gospel provides us with few specific moral precepts, but, instead, states ethical principles, which we should apply to the choices, which we encounter along life's journey. Perhaps the prime example of this is the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus sets out, as it were, a Christian ethos, which we call the Beatitudes.

The Gospel reading this morning represents something of an exception to this general trend. It does not lay down particular rules, but, in fact, goes one stage further, sounding rather like what we would call today a grievance procedure or a process for dispute resolution: all that is missing is a provision for the respondent to be accompanied by a friend.

Although the passage sounds a lot like a bit of bureaucracy, in fact, there lies behind it an important point: the blame for an eruption of contention within a Christian community might initially lie with an individual or small group of people; but it immediately becomes the responsibility of the community as a whole to manage the incident in such a way that it does not escalate beyond the point necessary for its satisfactory resolution - hence the incremental procedure outlined in the passage.

There is a fairly widespread view that if you get these structures right and they are implemented correctly, justice will inexorably follow; but that is not always the case.

In the first place, these frameworks often run the risk of favouring a particular sort of person: the articulate or those who have an appetite for the details of the rules and regs. That is why in serious matters, we are encouraged to engage a lawyer, who, as it were, acts as a transformer, fashioning our point-of-view into a presentation, which plays well in the formal context of a tribunal of some sort or other.

Secondly, all frameworks are vulnerable to being played and although the right answer might eventually emerge, it can be a protracted business; and we can be tempted to wonder whether it is worth the effort.

Ecclesiastical procedures are just as susceptible to these features - not least when the desire on either side is to win the argument rather than achieve an equitable resolution. This is, of course, particularly the case when the stakes are high for one reason or another. We need, therefore, to be wary of such impulses and approach these moments with honourable intent, seeking to find the right resolution rather than simply the one we would individually prefer. However, this opens up a much wider issue.

There is a fairly widespread feeling that societal problems are multiplying in our day; and the common response is to reach for the legislative levers to rein them in. Laws might serve to curb the outward manifestations of such conduct and the attitudes that inform it, but evidence that they serve to make lasting changes in attitudes is fairly scant: we have only to reflect that issues we might have thought had been addressed decades ago are confronting us once again; and quite frequently, people fence with the law probing for a gap in its provisions.

In the end, honour and virtue cannot be imposed by laws or the rather more subtle pressures to which we sometimes resort; but must be developed within ourselves. People have to feel, as we might rather inadequately put it nowadays, the common humanity we share and the responsibility to uphold a society, which enables such perspectives to flourish in practice. In the end, a human society is defined by the sorts of people who comprise it, not just the rules they enact to indicate what sort of society they would like it to be.