

Coping with Conflict

Joshua 22.11-12&21-27., Romans 12.9-21, John 12.1-8

Jan finished school last year and got a job working as a receptionist for a company dealing in industrial machinery. Part of her job was also to do some basic invoicing. She thought that she was fitting in quite well. The job was challenging but she had the feeling that she was making a significant contribution. Her supervisor was Mary, an older woman, who had been with the firm for 15 years. One day Mary was looking over Jan's work, when she said, "What's this? This is a machine part that costs \$16,000 and you've charged it out at \$500."

Jan checked... and Mary was right. The mistake had come about because she had wrongly coded the item. Mary reminded Jan that she had been given firm instructions to double-check her coding... then added that this sort of mistake costs the firm money. If there was any repeat, people would be asking about her suitability for the job. Jan felt terrible. She had forgotten Mary's instructions about double-checking. It was a genuine mistake and she felt Mary had been a bit heavy handed. Then, later in the day, she looked up and saw Mary talking to the senior partner. They are looking her way... are they talking about her... Yes, she could hear her name... Then the senior partner looked directly at her and nodded. For Jan the situation (that originally looked pretty black) was now a crisis. She was boiling inside, thinking, "I'll resign... one blooming mistake and they make an international incident about it... I know when I'm not appreciated... I hate Mary! Fancy telling the boss about me... I'll not go out of my way to do anything for her again."

By the end of the day Jan had settled down a bit, but she was still disturbed – and still angry at Mary. Overcoming her natural reluctance to be involved in a confrontation she decided to have it out with Mary before she leaves for the day. "Mary" she said, "I felt pretty upset that you saw fit to talk to the senior partner about my mistake" "What???... Oh, no he just asked 'how is the new girl getting on?' and I responded 'Jan... she's fitting in very well'"

One of the topics that I was advised would be good to cover before our move to Local Shared Ministry is 'coping with conflict.' I need to say that this is not in any way a reactive thing. I have been honestly impressed here by the harmony in the parish. Also by the warmth of my own reception, even though I'm here to act as a change agent, and by nature of the task is that I will make some people feel uncomfortable. However, we are moving very shortly to team leadership and a greater degree of congregational participation than has been the case. And it is human nature that, wherever people relate to other people, there always arises some element of tension, disagreement and conflict.

It happens at home, at work, and in communities. Conflict occurs between friends, marriage partners, workmates and church members. And I must say that conflict in itself is not bad – it can be an invitation for us to grow. So I'm not just talking about church this morning, but sharing things that may be helpful in our homes, workplaces and in the community. We begin with the scriptures...

In our gospel reading today we found Jesus in the home of Martha and Mary. Mary who loved Christ deeply took a container of very expensive Indian perfume and in a poignant and prophetic act she pours it over Jesus' feet. The action looks forward to the cross and the anointing of Jesus for burial. This is a profound moment when one would expect the disciples to be in awe as they see a glimpse of the agony ahead for their Lord. But there is no accounting for the way different people can apprehend the same situation. One of the twelve only sees a waste of money in Mary's action and

opposes Jesus to his face saying that the perfume would have been better sold and the money given to the poor.

Then, in our strange reading from Joshua today, we find ourselves in the story of Israel settling into the Promised Land. David, quite rightly, said this week that this is a difficult passage. Let me unpack the story a little. When Israel settled in the Promised Land two and a half tribes staked their claim on the other side of the Jordan River. Later they thought, "What if, in the future people say to us 'you can't be God's people because you live on the wrong side of the river.'" So they built an altar as a memorial – a reminder that that they were God's people; a reminder of the altar before the tabernacle. When the rest of Israel saw this altar they thought, "Horrors! Look another altar. They must have deserted the Lord God and be worshipping other gods. This is serious. It requires drastic action. We'll go to war against them." They had jumped to the wrong conclusion. Fortunately someone had the good sense to appoint a committee to investigate before they all buckled on the swords. Just as well. They'd got it wrong and a war was averted.

So broadening the topic way beyond church structures we ask, "What things can we do to helpfully cope with the conflicts that we face every day? Are there ways that we can react that will turn our conflicts into growth experiences? Is there a particularly Christian approach to this subject?"

In our reading from Romans Paul wrote "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12.8) Many Christians have trained in conflict resolution using the four Gs.¹

1. Glorify God – is our own impulse self-centred or are we seeking to glorify God?
2. Get the log out of our own eye – face up to our own contribution to the conflict
3. Gently restore – sometimes we need to graciously show others their contribution to the conflict
4. Go and be reconciled – be committed to restoring damaged relationships

However, the most important thing I want to say today, to breathe harmony into all our relationships, is this...

Choose to communicate

I've taken a lot of weddings. I'll only conduct a wedding if a couple will agree to a pre-marriage counselling course. The first thing we talk about is communication. I meet a lot of people who tell me that their husband or wife does not listen... or doesn't tell them what they are thinking. Robert Fryling (who writes marriage counselling literature) tells of taking his wife for a drive in the mountains.² It was a great day and on the long drive home they were in silence. He was basking in the pleasure and security of their relationship. He is thinking, "I love her so much that we don't even need to talk – we just have this understanding of one another." Unbeknown to him his wife was sitting in the car feeling hurt and bewildered. While he was thinking "silence is golden", she was thinking, "Robert must be really mad at me about something. He hasn't spoken to me for ages"

It's obvious, but the best road to conflict resolution is communication. Say what you think... don't assume it is already understood. Communication is not just talking. It is also listening. When we were at the workshop discovering each other's gifts last Tuesday night someone made the comment, "he's a good listener." It is a great skill. Even when there are irreconcilable differences good listening *alone* can take the tension out of a situation. Listen carefully. Listen without interrupting. Listen and reflect the other person's point of view back to them, so they know they've been heard:

What I hear you saying Bob is that you're upset that I've been working on the Jones account. That you thought it was your account and as far as you are concerned I've got no right to touch it.

¹ See Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Books, 2004)

² Robert & Alice Fryling, *A handbook for engaged couples* (Downers Grove, Illinois; IVP, 1977)

You are letting the other person know that you've heard their concern. That's the start of resolving the conflict. It might sound strange, but the closer we get to someone the easier it is not to hear them.

John and Ngaire went to a counsellor when they felt that their marriage was drifting apart. The counsellor introduced a stick into their sessions. If you wanted to talk you had to hold the stick. Only one person held it at a time. It was only then that John realised that he *always* interrupted Ngaire. It had got so bad that he only used her conversation as a pause to think what he was going to say next. So choose to communicate.

Find out the real issues

Surprisingly, the real issues are often very different from the presenting problem.

Him *When's lunch?*

Her *If I'm not going fast enough for you, you can get your own lunch*

She feels he's criticising her meal preparation. He just wanted to know if he had time to go for a run. Had he asked, "have I got time to go for a run before lunch?" she would have answered "Sure, honey."

Couples often develop a kind of code whereby they say something different from what they mean but it is still understood. It is a recipe for disaster, because while sometimes the meaning is understood it can also lead to bad misunderstandings.

Standing on the beach at night she says, "Isn't the moon beautiful" ... she means "I'm feeling romantic."

He, being typically blokish, hears this as an interest in astronomy. He observes the moon and the light from it and responds, "Yeah you could read a book by it."

She thinks, "I see he'd rather read a book than kiss me"

We need to say what we mean. Find the real issue.

Do you relate to this?...

She *Is there anything wrong?*

He *No!*

She *Are you sure?*

He *Of course I'm sure*

She *Come on, something's bothering you I can tell.*

He *Nothing's bothering me now get off my case!*

He's giving his partner the message that something *is* wrong – but he's fighting dirty by saying the opposite, shutting her out, and not letting her do anything about it.

Or in church life, I've often had someone come to me with... "A lot of people are saying that..." or "a lot of people are concerned about..." That kind of statement is hitting below the belt because it is emotionally charged and conveys a sense of general dissatisfaction. At the same time the dissatisfied group is anonymous. And when you take the time to dig deeper usually the real message is that it the speaker who is dissatisfied. Far better for the speaker to say in the first place "I'm concerned about..."

So try to find out what the real issues are. We're so complicated that it's not always easy.

Get it out in the open

If you are in a situation where someone really bugs you by something that they do, most often it's best to get it out in the open. We started with that story of Jan at work who knew she was being

talked about and allowed the situation to fester. She dealt with it by talking to Mary. So often, when we don't get it out in then open the final result can be an explosion of emotion. Better to talk about it sensibly. A couple of guidelines though...

- i) Avoid generalisations. "You always..." "You never..." "everybody thinks..."
- ii) Use "I" statements rather than "you" statements. "you" statements blame and threaten and preach. "I" statements leave the other person free to put their side of the story.

So when the kids come in from school and dump their school bags in the middle of the lounge floor, as they always do, my ideal response is not... "you lazy slob you always leave your bags in the middle of the floor for me to pick up" ...but maybe, I should first state what I feel...

"I feel frustrated every time you come in and dump your bags like that"

...then try and understand where the children are coming from...

"I know you are in a hurry get a drink and some afternoon tea when you get home"

...then suggest a course of action...

"But could you please make the effort to take your bags to your room"

Now, all that probably won't make much difference because it is only in TV sitcoms that conflicts get resolved in half an hour. In real life it takes much longer! Finally...

Apologise

There is no way that anyone is going to be right about everything all the time. The fastest way to heal a relationship when you have made a mistake is to say, "I'm sorry." An inability to apologise is a sign of emotional insecurity. And some people are so insecure that think if they admit a fault no one will respect them. Of course just the opposite is true. Asking for, and offering, forgiveness produces security and strength. Most of us have done and said lots of stupid and thoughtless things that we need to apologise for. When we don't apologise these things accumulate and they destroy our relationships. The possibility of forgiveness and a new start is foundational to our understanding of the Christian faith

Conclusion

Well, that's a few clues about coping with conflict. We could preach for a month or a year on this topic, but the big thing is communicating. Human relationships, whether they be in families, churches, neighbourhoods or workplaces, are a strange mixture of pleasure and pain; delights and demands; closeness and clashes. It's really up to us and the way we react to decide if the conflicts we inevitably face will knock us down or build us up.