

Gospel text

Matthew 18: 15-20

15 If your brother happens to stray, go and meet him alone. If he's receptive, you've succeeded in keeping a brother in the community. 16 On the other hand, if he is not receptive, go and meet him again with one or two people, so that what you have to say is confirmed by the testimony of two or three people. 17 And if he is still not receptive to this testimony, make it known to the assembly. Finally, if he is not receptive to the assembly, consider him a heathen and a person to be avoided. 18 Truly, I assure you: whatever you consider obligatory on earth will be considered obligatory to God, and whatever you consider nonobligatory will be considered nonobligatory to God. 19 And again, truly I assure you, if two people among you in the community agree on the object of their request, my father in heaven will see to it that this happens. 20 Indeed, when two or three people are gathered together for my sake, I am there in their midst.

Gospel commentary - Homily

Heaven means other people

It all began one autumn day¹. Overnight, Vanessa lost all her friends. At school, the ever-popular teenager now eats her lunch alone, locked in the bathroom, to avoid being called a "slut" in the cafeteria. Her "crime"? She started dating Laurie's ex-boyfriend. And Laurie, a student at the same school, was furious: because this boyfriend was the love of her life. And because Laurie is a great leader, she tells her side of the story and gets everyone on her side. She has no qualms about humiliating Vanessa in front of everyone at every opportunity. Vanessa isolates and withdraws, gaining weight by "eating her emotions". She always feels sad. Unrecognizable, she has to consult a psychologist. Then things start to escalate. Laurie makes death threats, screams at Vanessa that she's about to commit suicide, fakes near-collisions with Vanessa's car. It's all too much. Vanessa's mother contacts the police, and Laurie is criminally charged. A judge forbids her to contact her victim. But her failure to comply with the conditions earns her a "custodial" stay in a youth center. She is expelled from school and from her elite sports team. The court forbids her to leave her home for months, reducing her social life to nothing.

That sums up the horrific situation of two teenage girls. What's next? A team from "Restorative Justice", specializing in meetings between aggressors and victims, intervened in a mediation process and proposed that Laurie and Vanessa meet. Both girls accepted. It was an opportunity for Vanessa to ask all her questions, to talk about her after-effects and to hear Laurie's side of the story, as she confessed that her heartbreak had made her lose it, and she apologized. The two teenagers talk for three hours. They agree that all this has gone too far. Now it was time to move on; the wound had healed.

This story provides a context for understanding today's gospel. For if Vanessa has been hurt by Laurie, her healing also comes through Laurie. If hell can be other people, heaven also comes from other people. And Matthew's passage focuses on community life.

The passage can be divided into two parts. The first part aims to answer the question: what should we do when we see evil in our environment? The answer is clear: we must intervene, just as in the previous verse the shepherd set out to find the lost sheep. But it's necessary to intervene without publicly humiliating the author of the evil, and that's how we meet him alone. At the same time, Matthew's response emphasizes the need for patience: after the individual meeting, which yields no results, there is the meeting with witnesses, and if necessary, the meeting with representatives of the community. Total exclusion comes only after all these stages have failed. Matthew thus testifies to the existence of a mini-canon law at the time he wrote his Gospel, and thus to the awareness that a community has an identity and cannot accept just anything. This canon law is placed under the authority of God, who would ratify the decisions of the community. At the same time, this passage is followed by Peter's question: how many times must we forgive someone who repents? We know Jesus' answer.

The second part of today's gospel focuses on community prayer: "If two of you in the community agree on what they want, my father in heaven will see to it that it happens". What does this promise mean? We can guess that there's nothing magical about it. My parents, great believers, prayed for their daughter-in-law's recovery from cancer, and yet she died at the age of 36. The key to understanding this promise lies in the following verse: "When two or three are gathered for my sake, I am there in their midst". What does this mean? The others help me to incarnate Jesus, to enter into his vision, and so my prayer becomes that of Jesus himself, which is why the Father always answers it. And what is Jesus' prayer? "Thy kingdom come; thy will, not mine..."

What can we learn from today's gospel, which focuses on community life? It symbolizes a fact of life: to become ourselves, we need others. Of course, others can hurt us and lead us astray, but we need others to heal and find our way back, as the story of Vanessa and Laurie illustrates. So our openness and ability to be attentive to others is vital. But there's more. This condition of humanity points to a feature of the Mystery at the source of the world, a Mystery who is one and plural, a Mystery who is "family", a Mystery who is community. We can't move towards this Mystery without experiencing what is to be in a community.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, June 2023

¹ This story was originally published in [La Presse](#) (Montreal, Canada) by Caroline Touzin and Katia Gagnon, June 3, 2023. For the full text (French): [L'autre justice](#) ▲