

It's 7 o'clock on Sunday morning and the phone rings. It's 'Ernie'. (I've changed the name to save future embarrassment.) We've known 'Ernie' for a long time and bawled him out on many occasions for turning up rather the worse for wear, famously, on one occasion when he fell off the causeway at Harrold, ending up in the middle of the road and being brought to us on the back of a pick-up. 'He says he's staying here,' they tell me. He wasn't. He had just left but he was in such a state that we let him find his way to the wayfarer's room and shut the door. He remembers nothing of it the next day. He has a few aches and pains so I take him to A&E and watch as he heads for the door and then disappears round the side taking another way out. Some time later he phones: he went home to his mother and to A&E, in the far north, with several fractured ribs. He's on the mend but just wanted us to know how he was – it was probably 7 o'clock again on a Sunday morning.

He's one of several men we've bawled out over the years, for this or that violation of the rules, who still keep contact and want to know, 'How are things?' and are glad to tell us how they are, too. 'Bawled out' but *not* 'bowled out' one might say. So there is a way of correcting others which, occasionally, seems to work: a setting of boundaries, which we all need. But it has to be done without rigidity; with a willingness to bend the rules, if needed; to respect the essential dignity of the other person; to allow room for change, both in them, and in oneself.

I think this is what is behind the delicious ambiguity in Matthew's final admonition or suggestion: *if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax-collector* – or an alcoholic, one might add. It's ambiguous because it may appear, at first, to be about exclusion, banning someone, as was the norm in the Jewish cultural setting of the day, from having anything to do with 'normal' Jewish society; keeping Gentiles and tax-collectors at a distance. But these are precisely the people Jesus mixes with and is, in the end, condemned for. So it's also an invitation to do as Jesus did, for we're not here to condemn but to forgive and to keep on forgiving, both others and ourselves, forever and ever, Amen.

I've used the royal 'we' throughout because it takes a whole Church to raise a child. None of this can be done by an individual acting alone. Nor can it be done without prayer, without the constant calling on Christ, or God, for the necessary grace – for the love which God *is* and only God can provide.

You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the only thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.

It has a cost, of course, if only a 7 o'clock call on a Sunday morning.

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