

Rev Margaret

In the Season of Creation, we give thanks to God for this amazingly beautiful, complex and fragile world God has placed us in; we repent on behalf of humanity for the damage done to our home; we ask God to bring healing; and we think again about what each of us can do to prevent harm and promote the flourishing of all creatures.

This year the devastating floods in Nepal/Tibet have sobered us reminded us what is at stake.

We all live together on this amazing planet, and it matters to all of us that we leave it in good condition for our great grandchildren. In spite of that, over my lifetime, creation care has become less and less a matter of common concern and more and more a subject of heated debate and conflict.

This conflict has international and local dimensions, and sometimes it gets personal.

I am guessing that most of us, whatever our view on the role of humanity in caring for creation, have at some point found ourselves in heated debate with someone who believes the complete opposite.

Most families have an Uncle Harold who trusts his year 10 science education and Google searching skills more than the world's climate scientists. And there's a Cousin Lucy who is constantly sending everyone emails about how they can reduce their carbon footprint. And of course, an Aunt Hilda who dismisses every expression of concern for the environment as being part of a woke, Marxist conspiracy. And let's not forget Nephew Cormac who, as a member of Extinction Rebellion became the first member of the family to be arrested since their ancestors came to Australia as convicts.

These are made up, of course, but every family its own version of these people.

This is what Australian families look like now. Sometimes it is funny but sometimes those divisions become really painful, in workplaces and churches as well as in families.

In my first ever Season of Creation sermon, many years ago in a parish far, far away, I guess I must have talked about climate change as a crisis that Christian people need to be active in addressing because we believe God gave humanity the role of caretakers of our planet – and our planet is in desperate need of care. I don't really remember the sermon but that sounds like the sort of thing I would say.

A couple of days later someone – I'll call her Anabel (just to be clear, that is not her name) - spoke to me and I could see that she was upset and hurt by what I had said. She was upset because she strongly believed that the science of climate change is wrong and left-wing, and she did not like to hear what she considered to be incorrect

and politically motivated sermons at church. She also felt hurt, I suspect, because her position on climate change was not being given equal weight.

So, Anabel felt upset and hurt.

And she did exactly what Jesus said we should do in Matthew 18. She came to me and talked to me about it.

It sounds simple doesn't it.

You feel hurt; you speak to the person who hurt you. If they won't listen, you take a friend and try again. But it isn't easy, is it? If you have ever been hurt – and I know you all have – you know it isn't easy. Especially when the person who has hurt you has more power than you in that situation. Like, say when they are the leader of your church.

Understanding the role of that sort of imbalance in power means that church conflict resolution policies have needed to nuance Matthew's policy a little.

Where there is a significant power difference between two people in conflict, it is completely appropriate for the injured person to skip step one – which is having a one to one conversation - and go straight to step two, which includes taking a support person with them.

I often tell fellow clergy that it is OK to take a support person with them when they are going to have a difficult conversation with their bishop. And I say the same to anyone who needs to have a difficult conversation with any sort of leader.

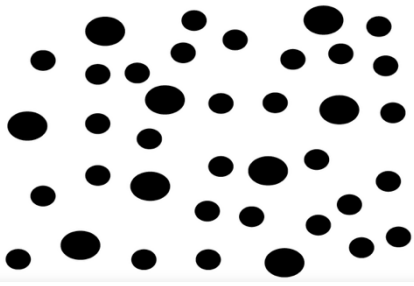
I am stressing this point a little because I have seen this passage used to shame people who feel they need support to have those difficult conversations. Surely the important thing is that they do have the conversation, rather than letting the hurt fester. If a person needs support to deal with conflict they should have it.

I know it took courage for Anabel to approach me and tell me that she felt upset and hurt. It wouldn't have been easy, but she did approach me, and I honour her for that.

She didn't complain about me to other people. She didn't form an anti-environment lobby group in the church to try to silence me. She didn't resort to passive-aggressive strategies to undermine me. All those things happen in churches more often than any of us would like to think. No, she came to me and spoke to me woman to woman.

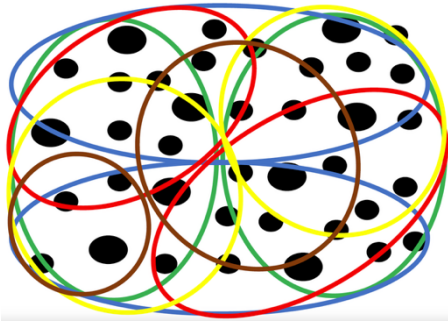
And though there was no chance we would come to an agreement on the science of climate change, and there was no change we would ever agree on how I should preach on the subject, we were able to agree that our fellowship is not based on agreement but on God's love for both of us. And we were able to agree that we loved and respected each other enough to continue loving and respecting each other despite being unable to agree on this issue.

In fact, somehow, we came out of that encounter with more love and respect for each other than we had before.



The very first church conflict seminar I remember attending, many years ago, included an illustration that has stuck in my mind ever since. If these dots represent members of a church, we can assume that there will be disagreements between those church members. There would be something wrong if they agreed about everything. There is

a name for churches where all members agree about everything. That is a cult!



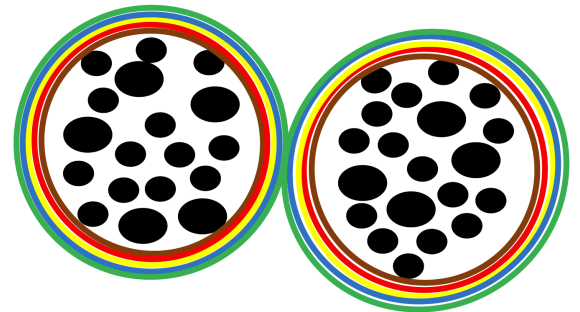
So, if we use circles to represent the groupings of people who disagree with each other, a healthy church might look like this. Maybe the two green groups are people who disagree with each other about climate change. Maybe the two blue groups are people who disagree with each other about immigration. Maybe the two red groups are people who disagree with each other about questions of gender

and sexuality. Maybe the two yellow groups are people who disagree with each other about first nation peoples. And maybe the two brown groups are people who disagree with each other about what priests should wear during church services.

The above is messy but healthy.

This is not healthy.

But the world we live in right now is becoming more and more like this. A polarised world. A world divided into opposing camps where people in different camps are barely able to recognise their common humanity, let alone have calm conversations over a cup of tea.



And the church is not immune from this polarised reality.

I'm not proud of it, but I catch myself thinking that way sometimes.

It was a bit like that for me when Anabel approached me.

She was a beautiful, faithful Christian woman who I admired and liked. We had a lot in common in our spirituality and had always connected warmly. But there she was expressing attitudes toward human environmental responsibility that I could not possibly disagree with more.

I had thought she was in my camp. Then I found that maybe she wasn't.

It was not comfortable for either of us.

Yet she had chosen to place herself in that uncomfortable position. She had chosen to approach me and talk about our differences because she valued her relationship with me more than her own comfort. She valued our fellowship in Christ more than the sort of fellowship that is created within groups of people who pretend to agree in order to remain comfortable.

So, whenever I am tempted toward polarised thinking, I remember Anabel. If I have a camp then there has to be a place for people like her in it.

And where that leaves me is with a commitment to live as though all humanity is in my camp.

And dogs. Dogs are in my camp too.

And that huge camp that covers the whole world is in danger, and as long as people with competing ideologies are throwing daggers at each other we are distracted by the conflict and not paying attention to the real problem.

We need to follow Jesus' advice in Matthew 18. We need to keep talking to each other, even when we strongly disagree. Even when it is uncomfortable. Even when it hurts.

And we need to understand Matthew's conflict resolution policy in the light of the other things Jesus is saying around it. The bit immediately before it describes God as a shepherd who is desperate enough to rescue one wondering sheep, that it somehow makes sense to leave the 99 others, and then throw a party when the lost one is found.

And that is what must inform all conflict resolution in the church. It is about valuing each other so much that we will do what is necessary to get each other back. It is about finding ways to be together as the body of Christ even when it hurts. It *is* also about keeping the community safe for everyone, and that is why, occasionally, if there is a member of the flock behaving like a wolf and causing harm, then they may need to be excluded from the community, but that is not what we ever hope for. That is a point we may reach after many tears and many prayers.

But that's not usually the outcome when we have these uncomfortable conversations. Much more often it is like Jesus said: if they listen to you then you have regained the sister or brother. And when that happens, we celebrate like the shepherd who found the lost sheep; like God celebrates when one of us returns.

I do celebrate because Anabel was so gracious that our conversation resulted in us becoming closer, rather than leaving us torn apart by disagreement.

So, as you find courage to have those uncomfortable but respectful conversations, may they lead to celebrations of the bond of peace that God has called us all into. Amen.