7.9.20

Yesterday's (Sunday) scripture readings raise tricky questions about when and how to speak to someone who we believe is doing something wrong. From the gospel we heard, ”If your brother (or sister) does something wrong, go and have it out with them”, and from the Book of Ezekiel, “If you do not warn the wicked man to renounce his ways, then he shall die for his sin, but I will hold you responsible for his death”.

Like the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, we must not just pass by on the other side, leaving the person to their fate. But nor is God’s command supposed to be ‘carte blanche’ for busybodies to go about self-righteously correcting others.

John’s gospel (Ch 3) records that Jesus, in talking to Nicodemus, said: “For God sent his Son into the world not to judge/condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him”. We must remember always when correcting others that we are Jesus’ disciples and not ourselves rulers or judges, and the aim of our intervention is salvation for the other, not a condemnation which as individuals we have no right or authority to make.

Someone said to me the other day, “The voice of discouragement is not of God”. I think that is such a very important thing to remember, especially when we are feeling down, but also it is also relevant to what we are talking about here. It does not mean that we or others should never be told ‘no’, but it does mean that the ‘no’ must be in a context of pointing encouragingly in a better direction.

In humility there is something else we need always to have in mind: we might not have things quite straight ourselves! In Luke's gospel (Ch 6) some Pharisees correct Jesus and his disciples for picking and eating ears of corn on the Sabbath. The Pharisees could on this occasion have meant well, correcting others for doing wrong as they saw it. But Jesus points out to them that their understanding of the Law was deficient, and that the disciples were actually doing nothing wrong. Even when correcting others we should remain open to dialogue, for we might learn something valuable from it ourselves.

In a recent magazine article, Fr Richard Leonard SJ quoted a Methodist minister who had said: “Christians are not meant to be salespeople for the Gospel – but rather are called to be free samples of it”. “Now”, Fr Leonard went on to ask, “are we up to being free samples, or loving giveaways, of God’s body language?” Do we, even as we find fault with our neighbour, present to them a taste and image of God’s redeeming love? As ‘free samples’ of the Gospel, we may be sent to warn, but not to condemn, and always to proclaim, uplift and encourage.