

**Reflection on the Gospel–23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A  
(Matthew 18:15-20)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

What does a just society or community do with its persistent offenders, with those whose behaviour continually disrupts or even destroys the unity of a group? This is an age old question that has no easy answer. The people of South Africa in the wake of apartheid and Timor Leste after twenty-five years of oppression recognised that a too easy amnesty is no solution for violent and destructive behaviour. Offences need to be named and acknowledged by their perpetrators for the sake of community reconciliation and for building the trust essential to the creation of a new future.

The processes followed in South Africa and in Timor Leste were similar to those proposed in today's gospel for members of the church community. The power to deal with transgression is firmly in the hands of the community members. All care must be taken to allow an offender to acknowledge the offence in private. If that fails, the matter is referred to a group of two or three witnesses, in line with Israel's ancient legal practice (Deut 19:15). The next step is referral to the assembled community. A person who refuses to listen "to the church" is to be treated as a Gentile or a tax-collector. The meaning here is not at all clear. Some scholars suggest that the Matthean Jesus is proposing exclusion from the community of those who refuse to listen. Others consider that he is advocating the sort of compassionate approach that Jesus has personally shown to outsiders, to those in need of conversion.

If our personal efforts to resolve conflict are unsuccessful, we do well to seek the wisdom of others. Jesus, God-with-us, is present in the assembly. We have that assurance. We also have the assurance that our failure to deal with transgression can leave a person unreconciled. We need to "loose" the sins of those who acknowledge their offences. In other words, we are called to forgive them and thus set them free from the burden of their sins against us. This does not mean that we overlook or in any way condone offences. In response to a request from Pope Francis, this Sunday has been named Child Protection Sunday, a Day of Prayer and Penance for Victims and Survivors of Sexual Abuse. While the gospel passage focusses on offenders, our first concern must be with those who suffer at their hands.

Forgiveness is needed at every level if we are to be in right relationship in the Earth community. Most global tensions have their origin in the unresolved conflicts of the distant past. Our future on this planet depends on our capacity to "surrender to the sky [our] heart of anger" (James K. Baxter) even as we do all we can to ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated.