

Just before the lockdown happened, I went to a colleague's desk in the diocesan offices to leave a message for her and I noticed that she had a Peanuts comic strip taped below her computer screen in the way that people sometimes do – so I couldn't resist reading it.

In the little comic strip, Lucy had walked into the living room, where Linus was watching TV and was demanding that he change the TV channel. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

Holding up her hand, Lucy replies, "These five fingers - individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that is terrible to behold."

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?"

I was reminded of that Peanuts comic strip just the other evening when I re-watched the film *The Long Walk to Freedom*. As many of you may know, *The Long Walk to Freedom* is a film based on Nelson Mandela's autobiography. And it reminded me of the comic strip because a recurring theme in the film is the idea that the ANC salute represents solidarity – individually the oppressed black South Africans can achieve nothing but together they are strong.

What unfolds powerfully in the story is that over the 27 years that Nelson Mandela spent in prison, despite all of the terrible injustices handed out to him by the white prison guards, he came to realise that the only way that South Africa could progress was through reconciliation and dialogue – so that whites and blacks could all be encompassed in that symbol of solidarity.

Winnie Mandela, on the other hand, suffered continued persecution while Nelson was in prison and her hatred of the whites grew deeper. Left to carry on the struggle without Nelson, she increasingly used her position to encourage brutal reprisal. Under her leadership, the symbol of solidarity became much more like Lucy's 'weapon terrible to behold' from the Peanuts cartoon. And horrific violence was perpetrated by Winnie's followers against whites and blacks alike, of which Nelson Mandela increasingly despaired.

And all of this leads me to this morning's gospel reading, which, as we heard, revolves around the themes of conflict and reconciliation. A superficial reading of this section of Matthew's gospel might lead you to think that it is just a bit of practical wisdom that Jesus is dishing out on how to get along together – but I think it's a great deal more than that.

What Jesus is saying in the second part of the reading is that our relationships with each other and our relationship with God are interdependent. When Jesus says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,' he is saying that he is our window to God and when we are connected in covenant with Jesus and each other, the glory of God is revealed.

And when Jesus says, 'Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,' he is saying that when our relationships with each other are broken and fractured, this is actually experienced by God in heaven – and when our relationships with each other are healed and restored, this wholeness is felt by God in heaven.

Many would say that this is exactly what Rublev's icon of the Trinity is trying to express in visual terms – Rublev's Trinity being the famous icon which I'm sure you will all have seen before. It's often said that what the icon is showing us in its circular representation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is that God's nature is relationship. And God invites us, through the restoration of our relationships with each other, to take the empty seat at the table and be drawn into the relationship which is God.

A person who truly understands this and is able to express it with deep holiness is Archbishop Desmond Tutu – who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the fall of apartheid in South Africa. Although he has written a number of books about his life and his faith, I think Archbishop Tutu expresses the essence of what I've just been saying in a simple but moving way in his book for children, *Desmond and the Very Mean Word* – which is obviously based on his own childhood. In the story, Desmond tells Father Trevor that he can never forgive the white boys for calling him the very mean word and that he will one day pay them back. But Father Trevor explains to him that 'getting them back' can only put more hurt into the world and into God's heart.

Reconciliation is never quite as satisfying as self-righteousness. To quote John Cleese, the really satisfying thing about self-righteousness, 'is that it gives you enemies and that means that you can go around believing that all the badness in the whole world is in your enemies and all the goodness in the whole world is in you'. But reconciliation is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

This isn't to say that we should ignore injustice. Jesus is quite clear that the Christian response to being 'sinned against' is not simply to mutely allow the situation to carry on. Nor can we just 'forgive and forget' – true reconciliation is a transforming process which both parties must enter into.

In our gospel reading, Jesus sets out three stages that an individual should go through in order to bring about reconciliation with another. And if the other person still refuses to concede that there is a problem after all of that, Jesus says, then all you can do is let the other person be 'as a Gentile or a tax-collector to you.' In other words, if they won't see the error of their ways, then you are better off simply treating them as a non-person.

Except there's something not quite right there isn't there? Because what do we know about how Jesus behaved toward Gentiles and tax-collectors? He made it a priority to extend the kingdom of God to them didn't he? In fact he was criticised for spending too much of his time sitting down to meals with them.

So is there an ironic twist at the end of Jesus teaching here? After making every effort to formally reconcile yourself to someone who has sinned against you, if they won't concede their wrongdoing then all you can do is set your feelings aside and offer hospitality.

Man, that's a hard teaching.

When I first went to work for the diocese, I inherited a colleague whose views on any given issue seemed to be the polar opposite of mine. In team meetings, it was as if she would go out of her way to undermine any suggestion that I made. And when I tried to speak reasonably about this with her, it only seemed to lead to an argument and make matters worse between us. Having tried everything I could think of, I had almost come to the conclusion that the only thing for it was for us to have as little to do with each other as possible.

But frankly, this would have been the easy option. So every Friday afternoon, I made a point of making her a cup of tea and offering her a KitKat from my secret stash. It took a lot of determination and I'm not sure whether it ever did get me anywhere but I think it was what Jesus would have done.