

## **Rabbits with large ears**

**Pentecost 14**

**10 September 2017**

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*Romans 13:8-14*

*Matthew 18:15-20*



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Come with me for a moment on a journey – to the middle of Africa, in fact the Central African Republic. There are a tribe there called the Manja, and the symbol for the chief of the tribe is not a lion, not a rhino, not a cheetah, or an elephant. No, the symbol for the chief is a rabbit<sup>1</sup>.

And why? Because the rabbit has large ears! The chief must have large ears to listen to God, to listen for the wisdom of the elders, and to listen to the conversations of the tribe, what is being talked about and discussed, the news in the 'hood, we might say.

Only when the chief has listened, taken on board and digested the words of the community, will the chief then speak, last of all, but speaking a word that it is hoped will be wisdom for that community. They put it this way: the word is too large for individuals with small ears, it is too large for the mouth of one individual. Rather the chief listens then speaks on behalf of all.

The challenge to any group, whether it be tribe or iwi, school or church community is to be a listening community with large ears! It is inevitable in a community of diverse voices, ages and stages, backgrounds and abilities, for there to be different points of view, robust discussions, even arguments and conflicts. And it is the same in any human group whether it be a family or two people in relationship, or something bigger the size of a church or school community.

In today's Gospel reading, Matthew seems to present a 3 part formula for what to do in situations of conflict in the church. In some ways I find that comforting, it is not only in our times that there is sometimes conflict in the church, it has ever been so, it's part of life in relationship, in community. But is it just a matter of following Matthew's formula, his prescription for two people quietly sorting out a misunderstanding on their own; then if that fails, the offended one taking along a couple of mates as witnesses and support; then if that fails, taking the matter before the church? Those who have tried this say it's not always as simple as just following a formula; human nature being what it is, sometimes people are just not open at that

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Rushton, 'A listening church with large ears' in Tui Motu, NZ, September 2014, p.26 citing Elochuwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, Orbis Books, 1996, p11.

point to reconciliation. It may take years or even a life-time. But we are reminded of the hard work of relationships, what it costs to seek to sort a misunderstanding out face to face with someone (rather than just talking about them behind their back or resorting to an email or nasty social media post).

We might think that Jesus' final words about this process let us off the hook. He says: and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector, two lots of people who any good Jewish hearer of Jesus would naturally despise and have nothing to do with. But hang on a moment, the very people whom **Jesus** was very happy to spend time and eat with, even party with, were tax-collectors. Indeed we think Matthew the gospel-writer might have been a tax-collector. And some of the people Jesus reached out to and offered healing to in the Gospels were Gentiles. Jesus was constantly willing to go beyond the barriers, to break down walls that divide.

It's been said that the word Community is made up of two words – Comm and Unity. And to achieve unity you have to work extra hard at the Comms part of life and business - Communications. And communicating well is as much about listening well, as expressing yourself clearly and honestly.

A couple of weeks ago, our Church calendar celebrated Augustine of Hippo, one of the fourth century saints of the Church. Way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine was a bright student, whose parents scrimped and saved to give him the best education they could in North Africa. But he nearly threw it all away as a young person, pursuing a lifestyle of rather too much partying and drinking, such that he has become known as the patron saint of brewers! Augustine also at 17 got into a relationship with a young woman, she became pregnant and they had a son, whom Augustine managed to have a continuing relationship with, even after his partnership with the woman had broken up. Sadly we hear no more about her. Augustine also had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with his mother, Monica, who doted on him and never stopped praying for him, and urging him to get his life sorted out. Augustine decided to cross the Mediterranean and head to Italy, but his mother followed him, and kept on his case! Augustine at this stage was very much into public speaking, debating and oratory. He went to university and ended up a professor of rhetoric at the university of Milan. He used to go along to the Cathedral to hear a great preacher, Ambrose – perhaps to start with Augustine was more interested in checking out Ambrose's speaking style, but he began to listen and found Ambrose was able to answer many of the questions Augustine had about the big issues of life and meaning and God.

One day Augustine was sitting in a garden, thinking he should do some study. He was vaguely aware of some children playing a game nearby and he heard one of them call out “pick it up and read it”. Augustine idly picked up the nearest book to him which was a New Testament, opened it up and read the words in front of him. They were the last 3 verses of our first reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans:

“Let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

He felt like a lightning bolt had struck him, that those words were aimed directly at him, and he resolved then to give up the lifestyle he’d been restlessly leading, and to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’, to become a disciple of Jesus.

Later on he would say, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”. Having finally found rest and peace in Christ, he devoted the rest of his life to following Jesus and became one of the church’s greatest theologians and bishops.

He faced a fair few controversies and challenges in his life and faith, but as he led his community and no doubt had a good number of conflicts to solve, he never forgot the promise of Jesus:

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. May we be mindful of Christ’s presence with us every time we gather as community here, whether it’s two or three in conversation, a small eucharist, a Vestry meeting or our whole community gathered in Sunday eucharist. Amen.