

Today, we look at the Guild Project, something that we generally do every year at this time. Guild projects have, naturally, varied over the years, and we have had the privilege of being introduced to many worthwhile causes. The project this year is conflict, and its resolution – a subject which is never far from the news these days. From the serious political disagreements in Parliament to the dramatic changes of government in Tunisia and Egypt, whose echoes are still reverberating around the world, not to mention the war in Afghanistan and piracy on the high seas off the coast of Somalia, it seems that conflict is never far away. Mercifully, some of the more recent conflicts have been resolved with relatively little violence, and we can only hope and pray that this trend continues, for the sake of us all.

The conflict we are looking at today, however, is nearer home – considerably nearer home, in fact. It concerns conflict here, in the church. I think the first thing to be said is that conflict in the church is nothing new. The Reformed tradition of the Christian Church, of which we in the Church of Scotland are a part, was born out of conflict, while schisms and break-away movements have occurred over the years, and still occur in various denominations from time to time. It also has to be recognised that arguments and the creative tension it can cause, if properly harnessed, can be a force for good, propelling us, albeit sometimes reluctantly, on to new and possibly better things.

Sadly, however, there are occasions when conflict can get out of hand, and when this conflict is between a congregation and their minister, then matters can quickly become very serious indeed. As a minister, I may say that I have been fortunate never to have been in serious conflict with my congregation. I was in Shetland for just over ten years, and, while we had our ups and downs – we didn't agree on everything – there was never a time when matters came to an impasse. I was therefore somewhat startled when I read that 33% of ministers and congregations – fully one-third of the church – had experienced serious disagreements, and that nearly half of ministers had asked for further training in the management of conflict and change. I found these figures very sobering indeed, and it is towards addressing this particular problem that the present Guild project is directed.

As in many things in the Church of Scotland – and others – history and culture play their part. The Church of Scotland in its present form was constituted in 1929, when the United Free Church joined forces with the Church of Scotland. But the United Free Church was itself a union, in 1900, of the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church, and each of them had slightly different cultures and customs, including the relationship between minister and congregation. These three distinctive strands, Free Church, United Presbyterian and Auld Kirk, are still discernible today in parts of Scotland, and it is something which has to be taken into account when tackling this problem. Another matter having a bearing on the issue is the manner of church government. The government of the Church of Scotland is conciliar, with councils, or courts of the church existing at three levels – the Kirk Session, Presbytery and the General Assembly. The way these bodies operate is, as had been said, by “robust debate and decision making”, where confrontational situations can quickly develop, and the most strident and confident voices find it easier to hold the floor. This in turn tends to breed further aggression. These problems have been recognised, and are in the course of being addressed, but I think you can begin to see how conflict is never far from the surface, and can only too easily erupt into open warfare.

So, what can be done? As I said, this is not a new problem, and as long ago as 1968, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman identified it, and, as was appropriate for an Old

Testament scholar, set it out in a book, a study in Hosea, hence our Old Testament reading from Hosea this morning. Hosea lived through very troublesome times. He was a prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel, and he lived during the time when it was under attack by the Assyrians, which ended, ultimately, with the total destruction of the kingdom, and the deportation of its people into exile. Hosea wrote his book as a parable, the story of a wife, the kingdom of Israel, being unfaithful to her husband, Israel's God, by forsaking his worship and taking other gods to her bosom. Hosea saw that the people had reached the stage where they were beyond immediate redemption – they were incapable of true repentance. National life was rotten through and through, so the corrupt state had to be swept away. But this doom was not the end. Hosea also saw that the possibilities of love are infinite. Even though Israel was destroyed and the people banished to suffer exile in a foreign land yet God's free grace would re-establish the bond between God and Israel. Hosea's concept of divine punishment is not one of irrevocable ruin, of being cast into outer darkness, never to return, but rather one of discipline, to bring the recalcitrant people back to a loving relationship with their God.

There is a beautiful little story, probably apocryphal, about an elderly Scottish minister who was concerned that his congregation were backsliding – they were falling into evil ways. So he preached a sermon warning them of the dangers of such conduct; telling them that they were liable, in the fullness of time, to find themselves lying in a place of agony and torment. "And", he continued, "you will look up and see the Lord in his heaven, and you will cry unto him in supplication, and say: 'O Lord, we didna ken'. And the Lord will look down on you from on high, and in his infinite wisdom and mercy he will reply: 'Weel, ye ken noo'". Hosea wouldn't have believed that was the end of the story. He would have looked for more, for the continuing and enduring story of how the people became, once again, at one with their God. I agree with Hosea in that I believe the power of love to be infinite, and nowhere do we find love so supremely expressed as in the coming of Jesus Christ. Our Gospel reading this morning tells of the call of a tax or toll collector to be a disciple of Jesus, which is followed by an explanation of how Jesus could allow such people to follow him. The early Christians would have used this passage to explain the presence among them of people whose religious and moral backgrounds were, shall we say, a little suspect. Tax or toll collectors in the service of Herod Antipas, for example, were suspected of financial dishonesty and disloyalty to the Jewish cause. As we read this passage, we can see the love of Jesus at work in this story. We can see how his love is able to transform people, some of whom may even have given up all hope of ever being able to lead a decent life again. Jesus's love restored them; it brought them to a point where they felt capable once again of making a positive contribution to society. In a word, he gave them hope, which many had long since abandoned.

It is therefore no accident that this Guild project is entitled "A place for Hope". It is seeking to build upon work already begun by the Ministries Council, helping to recruit, train and support a team of mediators who can be deployed where necessary, with the ultimate aim of the provision of a full-time professional development worker, to consolidate, maintain and continue the work that has been done so far. Severely disrupted situations need specialist forms of advice and support, and this project needs your help, both financial and spiritual. It especially needs your prayers.

Because this project will never succeed if it relies on money alone. Conflict between ministers and congregations is notoriously difficult to diagnose, and even worse to treat. Some people simply do not recognise that their conduct could be construed as aggressive or

confrontational, and ministers are too often very reluctant to admit that they have problems and require help, particularly in this area. Too often, I feel, do we turn to legalistic forms of defence, and too slowly do we turn to prayer and spiritual discipline to help us work through our differences. Better, I think, to use the power of prayer and redemptive love that Jesus has given us to change the culture that so quickly leads us into conflict. We need to find ways of encouraging one another to leave our gifts at the altar, while we go and settle our differences with our brothers and sisters, making good our quarrels before we all return together to share in community and sacrament. This encouragement is the gift that everyone in the church can give to those who are in deep conflict with one another, and in so doing allow the church to set an example before the community it serves. In this way we can make the church truly “a place for hope”.