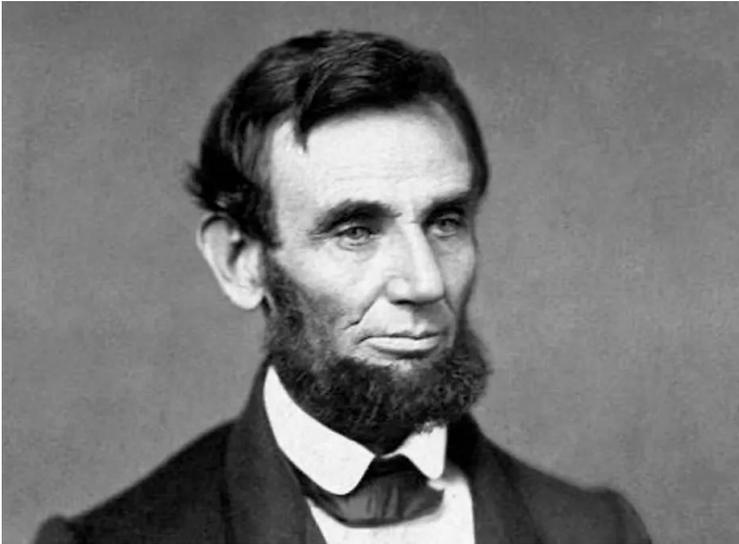


Speak with your brother or sister!

In the Second Reading today, in the exhortation section of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul speaks of the commandments concerning neighbourly relations, and concludes that these are summed up in the single command: "You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments"



Love is transformative. History offers us some powerful examples of this. One takes us back toward the end of the American Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln spoke kindly of the Confederate soldiers, a bystander was shocked and challenged him, saying: "I think that we would be better advised to focus on destroying our enemies rather than befriending them!" To this, Lincoln replied: "Sir, *we destroy our enemies when we befriend them.*"

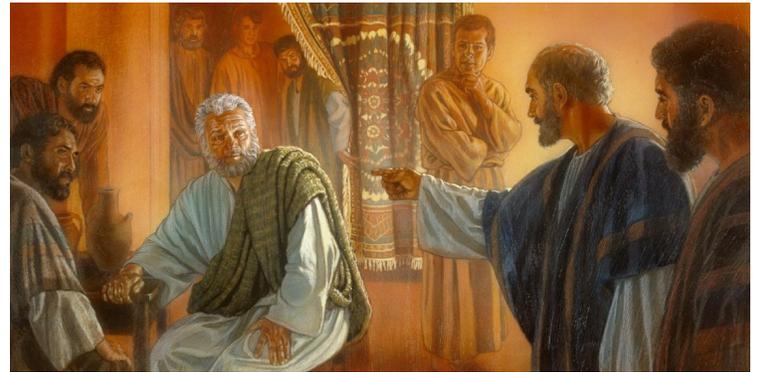
The transformative power of love in view of the Second Coming of Christ, is at the heart of this Sunday's Gospel.

The Gospel passage of today's Gospel is part of the final discourse of St Matthew's Gospel, which is sometimes called the discourse on the Church. It fulfills, in charity, the fourth section of the Torah, which concerned the legal requirements governing the life of the Israelite community, that they might maintain the ritual purity necessary for

worship, hence the reference: "The witness of two or three witnesses is required to sustain any charge".

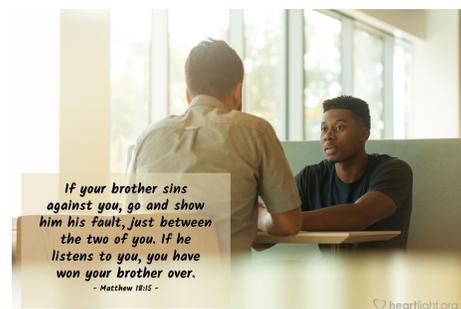
It concerns, out of the ultimate motive of conversion, redemption and inclusion in the Church, the need to approach in charity a brother or sister whose behaviour is manifestly out of order/out of step with that of the community. So important is this process of *fraternal correction*, for it concerns ultimate salvation, that the power of the keys is invoked ("Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven"), as is the power of prayer ("Whenever two or three of you gather in my name...").

St Paul once corrected St Peter, who appeared, in his governance, to be taking the weaker stand of compromising in the face of pressure exerted by those early Christian converts who insisted on imposing certain Old Covenant requirements on new converts. The fraternal correction was well received.



However, this is not always the case. We are now very well aware that the most destructive abuse has occurred within Church communities due to a failure of adequate fraternal correction and zero tolerance on destructive behaviours. Side-stepping awkward encounters, avoiding and shifting problems not only does nothing to solve them but even greatly exacerbates them.

Just very recently, the Holy See released another disciplinary document, announcing again zero tolerance of the abuse of minor's and the vulnerable in Church communities and requiring all bishops to work with civil authorities to stamp out the scourge of abuse from the Church forever. This document also requires an extended involvement of all the faithful in the selection of bishops, so that leadership is transparent.



If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.
- Matthew 18:15 -

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Note the transparency of the Gospel today. In the case of one who remains in denial or is unrepentant, the community is to become involved in fixing the problem. If this doesn't work, exclusion is the next drastic step, and it has the aim of bringing a person to their senses, so that, hopefully, after a short time, the desired result may occur and the individual may seek return to the community. The process of reintegration is not easy and involves transformation on the part of all. But it is necessary and can be illustrated in the wonderful and famous drama of Victor Hugo.

The transformative power of love is beautifully portrayed in a scene from Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, which is a story and narrative of good and evil, human exclusion, acceptance and reintegration into community.

When, in a hard winter, Jean Valjean is arrested for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's starving family, he is sentenced to five years in the galleys. However, after several abortive escapes, his sentence is extended for a further fifteen years of exclusion from the community. After nineteen years, he is at last set free but rejected from society at every turn. At the suggestion of a kind woman, he knocks at the door of the local bishop and is forthright in presenting his predicament: "I am Jean Valjean, discharged convict. Nineteen years in the galleys: five years for house-breaking and burglary; fourteen for escape attempts on four occasions. A dangerous man. There! Everyone has cast me out. Are you willing to receive me?"

The bishop answers: "You need have told me nothing. This house is not mine but Christ's. It does not ask a man his name but whether he is in need. You are in trouble, you are hungry and thirsty, and so you are welcome. You need not thank me for receiving you in my house. No one is at home here except those seeking shelter.

Let me reassure you that this house is more your home than mine, and everything in it. Why should I ask your name? In any case, I know it already. Your name is brother". And so begins the real story of transformation.

So in view of eternity, temporary exclusion, when required, has the very redemptive goal of an ever greater integration and inclusion.

That is why this part of St Matthew's Gospel is an integral part of the drama of Redemption.

