I once heard a preacher speaking about disagreements in church. He said this: “if you have been part of a church for more than six months and no one has made you mad, leave it immediately, because you’re probably in a cult.”

Today’s gospel reading is one of those ones that makes you sit up a bit isn’t it? It is Christ’s instructions about what to do when there are fallings out in church. And for any of us who have worked in a professional environment with things like performance appraisals, capability processes and disciplinary procedures, some of this probably sounds quite familiar.

First of all there is a quiet conversation. Maybe that’s a bit like a first verbal warning. Then there is a more formal meeting with witnesses: I have images of Saint Paul and Saint Peter being dragged into the office of whoever amongst the apostles drew the short straw of being manager of human resources in the emerging church: James of Jerusalem perhaps? And then the process escalates until eventually the wrongdoer is ejected from the church: given his or her P45.

It is odd to hear something like this read in church isn’t it, because we like to use language of the family when we talk about the church, and most of our service level behaviour tends to present the church as a collection of people who love each other, enjoy each other’s company, and basically are a perfect community of joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

But that same preacher with whom I started said in the same sermon, “if you have been a member of the congregation for more than six months and haven’t disagreed with anything you have seen or heard in your church, you’re probably clinically dead.”

Our Lord knew, from the long history of the people of Israel, probably from his own leadership roles in synagogues growing up, and above all just from the human nature which he so perfectly shares in through the incarnation, that people fight. People disagree. People argue.

And actually the church is no different. It is precisely because we are a family that we ought to expect the rough with the smooth. It is precisely because we are individuals gathered together into a congregation, a community, that we are going to experience exactly the same highs and lows, joys and sorrows, as any other community. And actually when there are significant disagreements in churches it hurts really badly because we come together with a set of expectations around love, charity and forgiveness. Last week I was present, over Zoom (other online conferencing applications are available!), at the licensing of a chum of mine into her new post in a church in London. And actually during the sermon the Bishop preached very honestly about the fact that this was a church that had recently suffered significant hurt. They had gone through what I think is referred to as catastrophic pastoral breakdown between the congregation and the last incumbent and there was a very good deal of healing to be done.

But actually even if we don’t experience that extreme, we all know that relationships can fray and become fractious, that they
can be fallings out and deep hurt, and it is instructive to reflect on what our Lord has to say about it.

And what our Lord has to say, perhaps as we might expect, is measured, proportional, and framed in the context of prayer. This isn’t simply a disciplinary procedure. This is a family loving each other through disagreement. It’s very similar to the sort of thing I sometimes talk about with wedding couples around how a marriage is supposed to work. I usually begin by describing Emma and my first huge row, which took place four days into our marriage when we attempted to navigate a left-hand drive hire car out of the centre of Florence!

The imperative upon us as Christian people, as a congregation, in our family or work relationships, indeed in our interactions with the world in general, is to begin from a place of prayer. Is to be generous. And is to recognise that disagreement is natural. The measure of our doing church well, the measure of our doing relationship, any relationship well, is I guess in that gospel imperative to love our neighbour as ourselves, to treat other people the way we would wish to be treated. I don’t know that I have always got that right. In fact I know that I have got it wrong many times. But what today’s gospel reading offers us is a model of generous, gentle, processing of a disagreement which tries to honour everyone involved. How radically different would our world be, I wonder, if every decision to enter into a place of conflict was made with a genuine expectation that the other person should be treated generously, gently and with love.

It isn’t easy. Loving our enemies is really, really difficult. But we are called to set that up as our aspiration. We are called, after all, to follow a Lord whose crucifixion we are about to remember at this altar, and who at the point when those who he had loved nailed him to a tree and shoved a spear into his heart, said, “Father, forgive.” Amen.