

19 February 2023

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
1 Corinthians 3:10-23
Matthew 5:38-48

I have struggled over what to say today. In the face of enormous and catastrophic events that affect us deeply, what might be said? Our minds and hearts are certainly drawn to those who have lost so much and who suffer. But in preaching there is a risk of being glib, or, at the other extreme, overly sentimental.

There is another source of struggle which arises from the choice we have created for ourselves in holding a harvest celebration. The lectionary does not present us with a harvest option, so in taking the lectionary readings we have just heard a selection of readings that say nothing on the topic of harvest apart from the need to ensure that enough is left for those in need. And a celebration of harvest jars a bit when we see confronting images of cornfields flattened, entire orchards uprooted, and fruit that was ready for picking floating in floodwaters.

In the end I have decided to preach on the gospel set down for the day. To stick with the lectionary, regardless of the theme it presents, is a symbolic way of saying that God is faithful, his word and teaching everlasting and always current; that in the midst of the particular troubles of today, we need always to be attending to God's big picture, his purpose for humanity, and his way of bringing it about.

I am a twin. My twin brother Neil has always been bigger than me. He was the physically stronger; I was the lippy one. We used to fight, a lot. One would nuzzle the other, it would escalate, and then it was all on! My parents would try to encourage us to find other ways of sorting out our differences, and would discipline us for fighting. In common with many parents of that era, they would use physical punishment. Mum had a strong arm and good aim for a smack, or would resort to the wooden spoon or the metre rule. Dad, a horseman, would threaten us with his riding crop: the two of us boys would be lined up before him ... "bend over and touch your toes" he would order ... then the tears would come as we trembled over the fear

of the whip and the fact that we couldn't reach our toes. I don't remember if the whip was ever actually used across our buttocks, but we were certainly scared of it.

Having three or four of us kids jostled up beside each other in the back of the car on the way home from Sunday School was often a situation of niggling. In my memory I can still hear Mum's voice, as she sang from the driver's seat,

Do no sinful action,
speak no angry word;
ye belong to Jesus,
children of the Lord.

"Turn the other cheek." "Go the second mile." "Love your enemies." "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." It all seemed impossible ... and unfair, at least on those occasions when I wasn't the initiator of the fight.

Does being a Christian mean being willing to be everyone's doormat?

And then in my early twenties there came a revelation. A minister explained the cultural context of these verses:¹

- "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." For a right-handed person to strike me on the right cheek, they have to use the back of their hand. This is how one hits someone who is their inferior. It is an insult. If you then invite them to hit the left cheek, they would be forced to hit you as an equal.
- "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well." In a society where most people owned only two garments, this would leave me naked. But my nakedness shames, not me, but those who see me in this state.
- "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." A Roman soldier from the occupying forces was permitted to require a civilian to carry his equipment for one mile. But the regulation was strict: the distance must not be any greater than one mile. If, having carried your equipment for the regulation mile, I then set off to begin a second mile, I not only astonish you with my

¹ Tom Naser, Tawa Anglican Church, date unknown ~1990. I have since found that Walter Wink set out this thesis in his *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Fortress, 2003. Tom Wright briefly summarises the same ideas in *Matthew*, pp.51-52

generosity, I probably alarm you at the prospect of being in breach of the regulations, and I shame you for having required the service in the first place.

That's all well and good. But my attitude to this new knowledge was out of order. It seemed wonderful to my twenty-something self. How clever! How creative! This isn't about being a doormat; this is a kind of fighting back but in a non-violent way. This isn't so much turning the cheek as turning the tables. It's like knowing a really sneaky judo throw: when I am attacked and am the weaker party, I employ the clever trick, and all of a sudden I have the upper hand. If only I had the wit to find such creative solutions in the situations that I faced in my own culture!

But all of this is problematic: from my youthful dilemmas to my adult dreams of clever ways of turning the tables, all of it really doesn't hear what Jesus is saying here, regardless of the accuracy of these interpretations.

So let's go back to the beginning.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

"You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ..." This formula of words is used by Jesus throughout this part of the Sermon on the Mount. In these statements Jesus is not contradicting Scripture but rather the oral traditions and teachings that were being handed down. The problem was that the leaders and their people had lost the deeper meaning behind the sayings.

The 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' This phrase comes straight out of the Old Testament.² It is part of the civil code given by God to regulate life among his people Israel, and it is intended to guide the judges of Israel. It was intended to define justice and to restrain revenge. But the scribes and Pharisees evidently extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts (where it belongs) to the realm of

² From Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, Deuteronomy 19

personal relationships (where it does not belong). They tried to use it to justify personal revenge.³

For a moment I'll skip ahead to the next statement:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'

This is one of those cases where a perfectly good command has been badly tinkered with. The original in Leviticus 19 v 18 is "Love your neighbour as yourself." The common received saying has dropped the "as yourself" bit. Worse, something has been added: "hate your enemy". This may seem a natural corollary. Do you remember Venn diagrams from school? (Set diagrams?) We can imagine the set containing all people. Those categorised as neighbours, whom we are commanded to love, are a subset of the set of all people. So what about the rest? Well, some of them must belong to a subset labelled "enemies". And what should be our attitude to them? It can't be love, because that's how we treat the subset called "neighbours". Hate is the appropriate attitude, we think.

But, as we learn elsewhere, Jesus defines the subset "neighbour" much more expansively. And here he says, "But I tell you, *love* your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

It seems to me also that Jesus is not here just addressing personal relationships within the community of the people of God. Jesus is not just talking about how to get on, within one's family and within the community. Jesus is talking about how his kingdom is coming into being.

Jesus has come to establish his kingdom, the perfect reign of God. Israel will once again be a nation under the rule of God and under God's anointed king, rather than a nation under the rule of the Romans and their Hasmonean puppets. Some sections of the populace are actively working for revolution – the Zealots for example. Others are waiting to throw their lot in with the Messiah when he appears – perhaps most of

³ Stott, p. 104

the people fall into this category. Some are doing just fine under the current regime and don't want change – the Sadducees.

The Zealots, and others like them, would use a saying “eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” to justify meeting violence with violence, to overthrow the rule of Rome in an armed uprising. They want to resist the evil they see in the ruling regime; theirs is a revolutionary resistance of a military kind.

Those waiting for Messiah are waiting for the military ruler who will lead them in crushing Roman authority and reclaiming the land for God and for the people of God.

The kingdom of God has particular characteristics too. As the Law of Moses set out, the people of God are to be ruled with perfect justice; they are to have concern for the least among them, for the poor, the widows, the alienated; they are to be a people of mercy, just as their God is a merciful God.

And it is this background in Jesus inaugurating the kingdom that provides the reason, I suggest, that Jesus chooses the kind of examples he does. Being struck by a backhanded slap is the experience of someone who is in a position of powerlessness. Being sued for one's shirt is the experience of someone who is so poor they have nothing else left worth taking. Being forced to carry a soldier's pack is the experience of the residents of a kingdom ruled not by God, but by Caesar.

But Jesus says that retaliation is not the way that God's kingdom is going to come into being. The Zealots have got it wrong – meeting violence with violence is going to fail. (And armed rebellion did fail, in AD 70 and again in 135, and Jerusalem was destroyed as a result.)

And the aristocratic Sadducees have got it wrong too. Under their way the divisions in society just become more and more marked, as the rich become richer, and the poor poorer.

But the rest of Judaism has got it wrong to. Because God's blessing is not restricted to them alone. Israel wasn't called out to be God's chosen people for itself alone. Israel was called out to be a light to the Gentiles: the means by which God's favour would come to all the peoples of the earth.

And in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus is showing how God's plan for all the peoples of the earth is going to come about. Jesus is calling Israel to be faithful to what it was called to be. And as his in-grafted people of Gentile origin, we too are called to bear the hallmarks of the way of the kingdom – the way of love.

Jesus is not trying to create a community of doormats, cowering under every unresisted blow.

Nor is Jesus encouraging us to play tricks to gain the upper hand over our opponents.

The way of Jesus is the way of love. The way by which God's kingdom would be established is through, not non-payment of taxes, not a revolutionary military coup, but through total obedience to and imitation of God's way.

You know the old saying, 'The end justifies the means.' Well, it does not. Because the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is as much about the means as the end. If the goal is God's reign of justice and love, then the means cannot be injustice and violence; it cannot be the exercise of power; it cannot be manipulative.

The world of course teaches and reinforces a different way, in which we strive to achieve our goals by whatever means are available. And we find ourselves doing this in every sphere of life: in home life, in work life, in community activities, and sadly in all the facets of the life of the church itself.

We prepare the way for the *kingdom of God* whenever and wherever we do things like putting the needs of others ahead of our own; when we listen to one another in humility and with a genuine desire to seek understanding; when we recognise and respect the God-given gifts in one another; when we encourage one another; when we choose not to exercise what power we have; when we refuse to entertain gossip; ... when we act in the ways that demonstrate that no matter the ends, the means must be love, Christ's kind of self-giving love.

Sources

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