

Reflection Sunday 23 February 2025

Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

A call for compassion

Reading Luke's account of what is sometimes referred to as the Sermon on the Plain, I found myself agreeing with American author Mark Twain. Twain was once asked: *As a Christian, don't you have a problem with all those bits of the Bible that you don't understand?* He replied: *It's not the bits that I don't understand that cause me problems. It's the bits that I do understand that cause me the most trouble.*

Love your enemies? It's not easy, clearly, as we don't see a lot of loving going on around the world at the moment, do we?

I bought a Sunday newspaper last week. After I'd read the Sports Section and screwed it into little balls to help light the fire because the weekend result for Nottingham Forest was rubbish, I opened the main news section and, of course, inevitably, the headlines were mostly dark and depressing –

the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, conflict in other areas of the Middle East and Africa, trade wars, displaced people, refugees, immigration... I couldn't go on reading it.

I put the paper aside. It seems that the modern world chooses now more than ever since the Second World War to ignore Christ's guidance to love our enemies.

When Jesus told his disciples and followers to love their enemies, it was in the first century AD or Common Era. His country was occupied by the Romans and many people in his generation were dreaming of fighting for political independence from foreign occupation. Common people wanted to rise up against their enemy and fight for the liberation of their homeland. They wanted a conflict.

And then Jesus comes along, preaching a gospel of peace and says: *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* His message sounded great in theory but it was ignored on the wider political stage at the time, and it hasn't taken root universally in the world at any time in the last 2,000 years and particularly the last 20 years.

And yet Jesus is right.

There have been, over the years, historical figures who have proved that a peaceful response solves problems a lot quicker and easier, with less bloodshed and more success than a violent uprising.

Martin Luther King's peaceful methods accomplished what Abraham Lincoln's wars never could. Nelson Mandela's forgiveness of De Klerk's government ended Apartheid in a way that spared South Africa the horrors of civil war. Gandhi's non-violent solution to occupation laid the framework for the world's largest parliamentary democracy.

Where peace is extended, peace is achieved.

Who are your enemies today? For most people in the UK and the Western World, apart from the threat of terrorism, our enemies are usually personal. It's the annoying under manager in the office who picks on you. It's the human resources director who makes the marketing department redundant, including you. It's the neighbour who replaces their garden fence with leylandii trees. It's the man ahead of you in the queue at the fish stall in the market who buys the last oysters on the day of your wife's birthday. For most of us, these are the 'enemies' or the conflicts or the inconveniences that require the love that Jesus is talking about.

In my flippancy, I am not being disrespectful to those who have serious issues with neighbours or family members or who have fallen out with friends or who have suffered abuse or serious hurt or undeniable and real injustice. I acknowledge that some people may have enemies buried in their past that cause them a lot more pain than the rest of us feel. But the instruction to show love towards them is no less real, however hard it is.

But what is the love that Jesus is talking about? Maybe love is the wrong word. Would it be easier for us if we replaced the word love with the word 'compassion'? Compassion is about trying to understand what drives the people who upset us; trying to see the other side of the argument, trying to help our enemies chose a different direction.

I realised the other day that an understanding compassion is the kind of love that a mother feels for a baby.

Here's some good news. You won't find this as a headline in the Sunday papers, but Jenny and I have just become grandparents for the first time. One of our daughters gave birth to a baby boy three weeks ago. We now have a grandson, and our other daughter is expecting a baby in July, so we are going to be double grandparents in double-quick time.

During Claire's pregnancy, she was sending us daily updates of her bump and how the baby was wriggling and kicking [he's going to be a footballer]. And it was great and her love for that baby was very obvious and powerful and joyful and forgiving. Wouldn't it be great if we could capture some of **that** love in a jam jar and spread it among the people we know, including the people we don't like?

What does mother-like compassion mean? It means that in all our relationships, even with our enemies, we have to be life-giving and nourishing. It means we have to show

tenderness, promote wellbeing, see all human beings, whoever they are, as precious and beautiful.

Loving your personal enemies is a journey. And it can be a long journey and take many years if the offence and hurt is deep-rooted. One of the problems is that loving our enemies must begin with forgiveness, and that – I know from personal experience – can sometimes be very difficult.

The boss that I had in the last 12 months of my corporate career never liked me; he didn't respect me, I wasn't one of his mates, I didn't fit in and he tried to ease me out of a job. In fact, he succeeded... although it was my decision to leave and I managed to negotiate a sizeable severance package that allowed me the time and space to pick up my next career, working in the charity sector.

At the time, I came close to hating my boss. I guess we've all experienced situations like that to some degree. In our minds, we play out the scenes of hurt over and over and provide an imaginary better ending which usually shows us as being stronger than we were in reality. But when that happens, the situation in our mind takes on an exaggerated importance and we lose perspective and it messes us up.

In my case, it didn't take me long, through prayer, to forgive my boss and I quickly recognised that he was probably an instrument in a bigger plan to change my life and I ended up being thankful to him, although he never knew that.

When we hold anger and hatred in our hearts, it eats us up physically by increasing anxiety and stress, it eats us up emotionally by wearing us out and leading us into bad decision making, it eats us up spiritually by disconnecting us from God and disconnecting us from love. It is certainly better to forgive; to put the hurt behind us and move on.

So, to go back to where I started, I agree with Mark Twain that it's not understanding what Jesus says in the Bible that is difficult, it's putting his guidelines into practice on a daily basis and in all situations that is the hard part.

Loving your enemies is difficult but bear in mind it's not the kind of love that requires Valentine cards and red roses, it starts with forgiveness and leads to understanding and it may not end in agreement but hopefully in some kind of peace with compassion.

Prayer

Lord, you have said
that to truly love you
we must also
love our enemies,
which can be difficult
when we disagree

or feel hurt and wounded.

And yet, in overcoming
those difficulties,
it is possible to see
the miracle that you
love someone like me.

Teach us to love, Lord,
as you have loved us
that this world might be
a better place
in which to live and share.
Amen

With thanks to Dawn Hutchings: *Truckers and Russians Disturbing Our Peace* @ Pastor Dawn beyond Church 20 Feb 2022

Marcus Borg, *Taking Jesus Seriously*; 2001.