

love your enemies

a sermon preached on the
7th Sunday after Epiphany

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by Revd Colleen Clayton

the lections: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119: 33-40; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-17; Matthew 5: 38-48;

People all over Australia are feeling sick this week after the deaths of four people in Queensland in two separate cases of domestic violence. Last Wednesday, in a horrifying attack, a woman and her three children were murdered by her estranged husband and on Saturday morning, another woman was stabbed to death by her former partner.

In Australia, approximately one woman a week dies as a result of violence from an intimate partner. And of course, that statistic doesn't include the number who are hospitalized, or the children who are exposed to this terrifying violence.

What can we say in the face of this awful truth? Of course, we pray for the people who have been killed, for their families and loved ones, for their communities and ours. We pray that they may be comforted in the grief, that eventually they may find healing, hope and peace. I hope we pray also for the men who carry out such terrible acts of violence. But what else can we do? As we gather today as a Christian community and listen to a Gospel reading in which Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, what are we to do?

Before I say anything else, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not suggesting that women in danger from violent men are in any way responsible for the violence they experience. The highest risk of experiencing violence from a partner is not race, age, cultural background, religion, or socio-economic status. It is simply being a woman.

There is no excuse for violence. Society needs to do a far better job of protecting the women who have had the courage to seek safety for themselves and for their children. There is absolutely no way that women in such situations should turn the other cheek. To read this scripture in that way is to utterly distort its meaning.

So, what are we to do with this Gospel reading in this context? What do Jesus' words mean for those of us who are not in a situation of abuse and who want to know what it means to turn the other cheek and love our enemies, in a week that has sickened us and brought home to us all the fear and violence with which so many women and children live every day.

Jesus himself was nonviolent and so was his teaching. This wasn't a weak or passive or pragmatic stance against the might of the Roman Empire, instead Jesus was nonviolent because it is impossible to really believe that God loves everyone and then accept violence against some of those people. Jesus' nonviolence was a lived expression of the reality of the nature of God and of God's realm. God is the God of love, not of hate, of creation, not of destruction. The God who *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous* (Matt 5:45). As God's children, we are to seek to love as God loves, to work every day to bring God's realm to reality on earth as it is in heaven.

When Jesus says, *if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also*, what does he mean? In Jesus' society, the right hand was used for everything, the left was only used for toilet purposes. It is only possible to strike someone on the right cheek with your right hand if you backhand them. To slap someone in this way was to humiliate them. Masters backhanded slaves, Romans backhanded Jews.

Turning the other cheek is a refusal to accept a dehumanising insult as well as violence. It is a courageous insistence on being treated as an equal that deprives the oppressor of the power to take the other's dignity. Effectively this action says, *Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me.*¹

Again, let me say, I am not suggesting that women in situations of violence should turn the other cheek. What I am suggesting is that as Christians, this text teaches us the kind of attitude with which we are to live.

We are called to stand against anything that humiliates another person. We are to do this without resorting to violence ourselves, in a way that affirms the dignity and worth of the oppressed and that challenges oppressors to see the other as someone of equal value to themselves. As Gandhi taught, *the first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything humiliating.*²

To bring God's realm to earth is to refuse to accept anything that robs another of the dignity of a child of God. To love our enemies is to work towards claiming the full humanity of the victim, and of the perpetrator. It is not about letting anyone off the hook. God's love is strong and courageous. It demands dignity and respect for all.

This means that we cannot draw lines that determine who we will and won't love. As soon as we do, we will find that Jesus is standing on the other side of the line. The church as an institution, and we as Christians, must stand alongside and affirm the full humanity of women, of refugees, of people who are gender diverse, of all people who are oppressed, refusing to allow their enemies to demean them. We must be amongst those who show respect for all. It doesn't sound like much, but if all our actions and choices were shaped by the question, *is what I am about to do or say respectful of everyone*, it would have a huge impact on the world. As Malcolm Turnbull once said, *not all disrespect leads to violence, but all violence comes from disrespect.*

Choosing to stand beside the oppressed, listening to their stories, trying to understand their experiences, seeking their dignity, helps to further God's realm. But as we choose to do this, we must not fall into the trap of hating their enemies, those who oppress them. We must somehow remember that even those who do terrible things are loved by God and that we too are called to love them.

What does that mean? It doesn't mean that we should feel a lovely, warm, emotion for them. It does mean that we must choose to be nonviolent and unprejudiced towards them in what we think and say and do. We must recognise the structures of our society that perpetuate disrespect and breed violence, and we must work to change them. We must remember that God's love is for all, no matter what.

Love for enemies means that we allow ourselves to become involved in the complexities of life, refusing to look away and pretend we don't see, but taking a profound accountability for others. We must stand, non-violently, against anything that humiliates, oppresses, abuses or demeans so that we may be children of our Father in heaven and so that we may affirm that status for all humanity.

And in these days of environmental degradation and the climate crisis the world is facing, I hope we can quickly learn to extend God's love beyond just humanity, to all

¹ http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm

² http://www.cres.org/star/_wink.htm

creation, non-violently opposing the wanton destruction of all that God made and pronounced good.

Today's Gospel reading ends with the words, *be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matt 5:48). I'm certainly not perfect and I'm afraid there is no sign that I'm going to be any time soon. Not perfect, that is, in the Greek philosophical sense of being without flaw. I might have a better chance of being perfect in the Hebrew sense of being whole-hearted.

Of course, to be whole-hearted means to love and accept ourselves as God does; continually failing but going on in the knowledge and strength of God's love for us. Accepting our flaws, and the things that make us vulnerable, as well as our gifts, and the things that make us strong.

This means that we must love the enemy within. For many of us, this is the worst and most persistent enemy of all. It is very hard to love all the parts of ourselves of which we are ashamed and which we would rather not admit, even to ourselves, but these are our enemies and we must learn to love them too. *When there is no enemy within us, the enemies outside cannot hurt us.*³

Jesus understood the enemies within and without. It is why he summed up the law by saying, *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself* (paraphrase of Matt 22:37-40). First, we must love God, then, because God loves us, we must learn to love ourselves. Only as we do that can we love our neighbours and even our enemies.

Let us pray.

Jesus, Prince of Peace,

We pray for all who suffer at the hands of others.

We pray too for those who deliberately cause suffering.

You have taught us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

We ask that you help us to live so that cycles of humiliation are ended, systemic injustices are exposed, violence is ended, and the world is transformed. Amen.

³ Rajiv Sahay, *Speaking Tree*.