

on being holy
a sermon preached on the
second sunday before lent
19 February 2017
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by dr muriel porter

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

Two threads are common to this morning's readings from Leviticus, the letter to the church at Corinth, and today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount: "love your neighbour" and "you shall be holy". I imagine in most churches following the lectionary today the focus will be firmly on the first of those strands, love your neighbour, with the emphasis on what we might call the societal aspect: doing the right thing by our immediate neighbours, living by the golden rule – doing to others as we would have them do to us – and doing our bit to help those in need. It is all there in Leviticus: leaving the harvest gleanings and fallen grapes for the poor and alien, not stealing or defrauding, acting justly etc. All right and good. These teachings have informed the charitable impulses in our society, and not just specifically Christian activities. Secular charities have sprung out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whether they are aware of it or not; so too the imperative for government to provide assistance to those in need, including to offer aid to those in need overseas.

So is being a good neighbour what it means to be holy? To be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect? Well, no. Jesus takes the teaching about neighbourliness to an entirely different level, and it is hard, very hard. At the heart of his teaching is a moving beyond simple kindness, generosity and decency, and being law-abiding. He goes far deeper, as we saw last week in his teaching on murder, adultery, and divorce. As Fr David said, "I am not truly a follower of Jesus simply because I have obeyed social norms and practices". Our baptismal calling, he said, is to radical transformation, and that transformation takes us to an entirely different level of loving our neighbour.

Listen to today's Gospel. When someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek. In other words, don't retaliate. Don't strike back. That goes against every human instinct. It is hard. Jesus calls us to abandon a culture of violence and retribution, which only leads to more violence, creating an endless cycle of violence. It is how wars start: in the home, in the workplace, in the church, and in the world.

Theologians are quick to claim that in advocating 'turning the other cheek' Jesus was speaking about situations at the personal, or small group, level; hardly realistic on a societal level, where wrong-doing needs to be restrained, they claim.¹ It is so easy for us to see this teaching as an unrealistic ideal, because obviously we can't turn the other cheek to a murderer or Adolf Hitler. There are times when we have to respond to violence, yes, even with violence. So we have put this teaching into the

¹ Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2004, p. 61

“too hard” basket and have quickly absolved ourselves and society in general from this precept altogether, even though it was the way Jesus himself lived and died. I have said that our society has in general responded positively to the teaching on good neighbourliness. But it has almost entirely rejected the teaching about non-retaliation. Our society actually functions largely on the principle of retaliation. It is built on competition, and creating winners and losers in every field. It infects business, advertising, politics and personal relationships. Last week the Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce advocated retaliation in a radio interview. Speaking of the political fight over preference deals in the forthcoming Western Australia election, he maintained that when “one scratches, the other scratches back”. Everyone does it, he said, be it to a business partner or a girlfriend.

Just think for a moment what our society might be like if it adopted Jesus’s teaching of non-retaliation in these areas instead. If politicians tried to find ways to work together for the good of the nation, rather than to score points against the other side; if people in business stopped trying to damage their competitors; if couples stopped hitting back at each other when they disagree, just because they can.

And then there is the other teaching, going the second mile. That refers to the situation in Israel in Jesus’ time, when the Roman army had the legal right to press civilians into service, such as carrying baggage for them.² It is what they did to Simon of Cyrene, when they made him carry Jesus’ cross. That particular situation clearly does not apply to us, but we can understand what ‘going the second mile’ means in our society. It means willingly going beyond what is required, going beyond merely doing the minimum, in other words living out of a spirit of generosity and selflessness. That is not our society’s pattern, though. We have become so inured, haven’t we, to insisting on *our* rights, first and foremost, demanding to have our own way, to get what we want, our right to make as much money as we can even though it means others will have less, and so on. It is the principle underlying the money columns in the newspapers, and opposition to every new idea put forward, anywhere. It is all about ‘me’, my rights, my needs.

The really hard teaching in today’s Gospel, though, is ‘love your enemies’. So much easier to hate them, to feel aggrieved and angry with them, and to want to see them brought low. And this too infects our society, to its great detriment. We see it in the feverish attempts to find someone to blame when things go wrong, to the point where we almost manufacture ‘enemies’. A terrible accident? Find someone to blame, so we can make them a scapegoat that will absolve us of any responsibility and assuage our hurt and grief – even though it actually won’t. How rare when people refuse to apportion blame for the death of a loved one in what is clearly a freak accident, for instance. We glimpse the holy when that happens.

So how can we respond to this teaching in our everyday lives – when we are persecuted or hurt or misrepresented or dismissed or rejected or treated unfairly? How can we ‘love’ our enemies? It helps to remember that loving is what we *do*, rather than what we *feel*. We can *choose* to love, even if we do not feel loving. Remember too that Jesus does not command us to ‘like’ our enemies. Loving does not require liking.

Jesus actually offers us the clue to how to love our enemies: “pray for those who persecute you”, he says. Pray for them, even if we begin with gritted teeth, even if we feel we just cannot do it. Just do it; just pray for them; and keep praying for them. It is remarkable the difference that that can make to us and to our perception of the person we pray for.

² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991, p. 89

And it is there in our Lord's own prayer: "Forgive us our sins, **as we forgive those who sin against us**". This is the central prayer of our faith, and I suspect this line is there because Jesus knows that we need to say this over and over again, because we find it so very hard to forgive those who have hurt us, particularly if it is an horrendous hurt. It is an ongoing process, and even if we do not feel very forgiving, if we feel we cannot ever forgive, just saying those words again and again and again can begin the ongoing process of healing.

This is how we are transformed, how we become holy, perfect as God is perfect, that is, by striving to behave towards others, including our enemies, in all circumstances and situations, as God acts towards us and all creation: loving all of us, and forgiving us. In this way, even though we struggle and stumble and often fail, we show ourselves to be children of God and disciples of Jesus, as in this radical way, we "reflect the divine".³

³ Brendan Byrne, p.62