

19th February 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **32** **“Meet and right it is to sing”**
 611 **“Brother, sister, let me serve you”**
 676 **“Christ, from whom all blessings flow”**
 682 **“God of grace and God of glory”**

READINGS: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11 & 16-23
 Matthew 5: 38-48

“LOVING ENEMIES - HOW POSSIBLE IS IT?”

“You have heard it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy’ but I tell you, ‘love your enemies. Pray for people who persecute you.’”

This is the most challenging of Jesus’ statements – indeed many people, including some Christians, think that Jesus was being too idealistic for ordinary human beings like you and me.

The verses which we have heard read from Chapter 5 of Matthew’s Gospel are part of what has become known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’ – a concentrated statement of Christian ethics in terms of how we should relate to each other as communities and as individuals.

Earlier on in this sermon, at the beginning of Chapter 5, Jesus urges his listeners to be salt and light to the world around them. Jesus was speaking both to Israel, the nation, his fellow Jews who calling from God was to show others the way and also to the individuals gathered there on that hillside. For us, reading these words 2000 years down the line, the message is both for us as church communities and for us in our individual lives.

Throughout this sermon Jesus contrasts the Laws of the Old Testament (as we now know it) with a whole new way of being human in God’s world which he is inaugurating. Jesus speaks of this as not abolishing the old law but fulfilling it. In other words Jesus is saying that God seeks a Kingdom where people do more than follow laws and obey rules and regulations, rather he seeks a kingdom where people have a change of heart, a change of motivation driven by love of others.

So it is in this context that we need to consider the words which are our focus for today, ‘love your enemies.’ To the leaders of Israel these words were not only idealistic and unrealistic but totally impracticable. The Jews had many enemies – they lived under Roman rule and there was no love lost between Romans and Jews. And there were plenty of divisions within the Jewish community – between rich and

poor, devout and less devout and between those who thought that the Romans should be overthrown and those who collaborated with them. With plenty of enemies around – surely to love them was to make oneself vulnerable even ridiculous.

Jesus told his hearers not to use violence to resist enemies or as a way of combatting evil – no longer an eye for an eye. ‘Do not retaliate when hit, do not refuse when someone in authority tells you to do something.’ Just imagine how this would be heard by Jews treated like dirt each day by their Roman overlords, by people forced to do work for the occupier without pay?

Last weekend, in preparation for their visit to India, Leslie and Margaret watched every DVD on India they had and they invited me to watch the film, Gandhi, with them.

Gandhi was a Hindu, but a Hindu who recognised Jesus as an inspired religious teacher. Gandhi knew the Bible, especially the New Testament and he knew that Jesus as well as the Hindu teachers, spoke of a non-violent way of life and love for enemies. Now is not the time to tell the full story of Gandhi – see the film if you have never done so but also forgive me for simplifying what was a long and intricate story.

Gandhi was a lawyer, trained here in London. As a young man he travelled to South Africa to take cases for the Indian community living in the province of Natal. He was utterly appalled by the racial discrimination that Africans, Indians, all people of colour faced in South Africa. He experienced it himself. He had bought a First class rail ticket (unaware that people of colour, however well-educated could not travel first class.) He was unceremoniously thrown off the train onto the trackside dust, followed by his luggage.

His experience in South Africa caused a profound transformation in Gandhi and a political awakening. He went back to India convinced that he would resist British colonial domination, urge Indians to be proud of their heritage and to take back their economy by making their own clothes as they used to instead of buying goods made in Manchester or Leeds.

His actions and words got him thrown in jail, time and again, by the British authorities – he did not resist violently only arguing his case and he stopped his supporters from reacting violently to what was happening. When he failed to stop the violence of his supporters he went on hunger strike.

The British authorities used the differences between Muslim Indians and Hindu Indians to maintain that India was not ready for independence, not safe for independence. In response Gandhi did all his might to bring Muslims and Hindus together. He sought to work together with the Muslim leaders. When violence was incited or broke out Gandhi pleaded for peace and non-violent action. When people did not listen to Gandhi he went on hunger strike until people stopped their fighting fearful that Gandhi would die. A radical Hindu Nationalist shot Gandhi – India did not gain independence as one country but as two – India, predominantly Hindu and

Pakistan, predominantly Muslim after a terrible forced migration which saw Muslims marching in one direction and Hindus in the other. Thousands upon thousands died.

In one sense Gandhi's non-violence, his seeking love for enemies can be interpreted as failure. India was partitioned, thousands died, people of different faiths did not live side by side amicably. But in another way he succeeded – he maintained his non-violent stance and love of enemies despite all he suffered. His example has inspired generations not just in India but around the world. Nelson Mandela was one who looked to Gandhi for inspiration. And Gandhi never let hate or anger distort his own humanity. He saw beyond his life seeking a deep reconciliation of people.

So what then does it mean for us to live as people who love our enemies?

First of all 'enemy' is a strong word. Do we have people who we regard as enemies? Are there people we know who say bad and untrue things about us? Are there people in our workplace who try to undermine us for their own purposes? Are there people who put provocative statements about you on Facebook or other social media?

If there are such people – or if we ourselves are country among such people by others – let us name the names and acknowledge how we feel. If we have acted as an enemy to another – let us acknowledge that now and asked to be released from any hate we feel.

So we have identified any enemies. Now we are charged by Jesus to 'love' them. What sort of love is this? Well the love of which Jesus speaks here is not the romantic love of last week's Valentine's Day not the love that exists naturally between family members. Jesus is speaking of 'agape' – the selfless love that seeks the well-being of others without any expectation of reciprocation. To seek the well-being of your enemy is a real step of faith. It requires courage, courage to forgive, courage, if possible, to say it to them face to face.

As Leslie mentioned last week it may well be that in speaking to the one who has done us wrong, to those we think hate us that we come to understand what has shaped them and prompted their words and deeds. This is the basis of the schemes of restorative justice which bring the perpetrators of crime and their victims together – so that they may know, forgive and understand each other.

To seek the wellbeing of your enemy requires love and love requires the willingness to forgive. Forgiveness is not ignoring what has happened but is a seeking to understand what has happened and to release its hold – on us and on the perpetrator.

To fail to forgive, to fail to love means harbouring hatred in our own hearts and doing that warps our own personality. I am sure that you have known people who have allowed hatred and bitterness to define them as people ... and they are not nice people to be around. Hatred scars the soul and distorts our own humanity. Only love

has the power of turning an enemy into a friend, only love has the power to release us from past grievances.

We certainly don't have to like our enemy but in loving him/her we have to envisage them as real human beings, just like us, with strengths and weaknesses just like us. We have to love our enemy and regard him or her as a child of God, just like us.

I can hear your minds working, I can see your thinking – 'yes, we have heard you, it sounds a good idea – loving enemies – but I'm just not sure I'm up to it. Have I? Have we the spiritual and psychological strength to do it?

Well, if you never try you'll never know. And if you try and there is a positive outcome, it will be that much easier next time. You will be on that wonderful road to having your mind and heart in line with the mind and heart of Jesus, just as he prayed for. You will be on the road to being true children of your Father in heaven – inspired by Jesus' refusal to react with hatred towards his enemies.

Let us remember that scene in the Garden of Gethsemane in the last few days of Jesus's earthly life, as officers came to arrest him. Peter reacted in an instinctive way, seeking to defend his master he cut off the ear of the officer. Jesus rebuked Peter for that was not the way of love.

It is highly unlikely that any of us will face the degree of enmity and opposition that Jesus faced.

When we are faced with challenging situations, when we are tempted to retaliate and to offer a harsh word for a harsh word, a taunt for a taunt, a malicious rumour for a malicious rumour or a hateful tweet – let us recall that scene in the Garden of Gethsemane – draw back from hate and ask Jesus to help us to love our enemies as he has loved us. Amen