

Sexagesima – Ordinary Sunday 7C

Arguably the most difficult of Jesus's commandments would be the one we have heard in today's Gospel - "Love Your Enemies" – could I ask all of us to think of an 'enemy', This enemy could be someone whom we have had a falling out with, someone who has done us some wrong, someone who has hurt us in some way, a person who has let us down in the past; Now think how you have loved this enemy. Have you loved them at all or have we hated them instead? Have we disregarded the commandment of Jesus to love our enemy or written it off as something not to be understood literally? If so we are wrong, as he clearly states with clear clarity –

"But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" – We are commanded to love not just our neighbour but our enemy. How are we to understand this? Is this realistic? Is this commandment practical? Jesus has pushed vulnerability to fresh extremes.

The central theme of the Gospel today is the love of enemies. In between come concrete illustrations of what loving one's enemies might mean in practice: returning a blessing for a curse, turning the other cheek, not withholding one's shirt from a person who demands one's coat, and so forth. All involve responding to injury or unreasonable demand with nothing but generosity and the abandonment of all restitution claims.

It has been reasonably suggested that the instruction has an impact on the situation of people in an occupied country such as Palestine, at the time of Jesus under the Romans. The injuries listed are particularly those ordinary citizens

would be likely to suffer at the hands of Roman soldiers, who could bully and plunder them at will.

How can we love our enemies? How is it possible for ordinary human beings like us to love those who do not love us, but make our life unpleasant and difficult?

Firstly, what do we mean by love? An excellent definition of love comes from the great medieval Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas – **Love is to Will the good of others or the choice to will the good of others**, even if it's not in one's self-interests. Jesus does not ask his disciples to fall in love with their enemies – that would be wholly unrealistic. We are not commanded to like our enemies. Rather, the followers of Jesus are challenged to be determined about their enemy's welfare, to will their ultimate good, to be stubbornly gracious, and to refuse to pay back violence with violence.

Because hatred can be defeated only by love; injury can be healed only by forgiveness; evil can be controlled only by goodness. This may not reflect conventional wisdom, but it is Jesus' wisdom in action. This is what Christianity offered the world, which is all about getting even with those who persecute us.

The great non-violence campaigner Gandhi, in India, was inspired by the Beatitudes of Jesus, in his struggle and campaign against injustices of the British Empire in India as he fought for the freedom of his people. It is easier to fight injustice and oppression with violence than with non-violence. We know that from history including the history of the Jewish people. The Zealots and similar groups took arms against the Romans to fight oppression but Jesus only fought with non-violence.

Of course, every person and every nation has a valid right to defend themselves in the face of hostility and violence which would be a just war, in those circumstances. However, Jesus has also shown the world the way of non-violence. Together with the fifth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' – this commandment to love your enemy offers clear guidance to the Church about acts

of violence and war. And yet, shamefully, we can all point to some terrible events in history in which the Church herself seems to have disregarded such guidance. Some public apologies have been made by church leaders for some past wrongs, Pope John Paul II apologized during the Jubilee Year in 2000 for the Crusades and the Inquisition, and many other recent apologies for situations of injustice and abuse within the Church herself, such as cooperating with the removal of Indigenous Children from their families and clerical abuse of children and vulnerable persons. So the Church cannot be triumphalist in preaching what she doesn't practice but be humble, ask for forgiveness, and follow her Saviour.

On the other hand, we recognize the many instances the individual Christians the living Saints, in various contexts have loved the enemy in a sacrificial way. With this command to love the enemies, Jesus is seeking to teach a fundamental attitude according to which one would be prepared to be vulnerable to a degree that would be thought foolish by the standards of the world.

The grounds for practicing the love of the enemy in such vulnerability and generosity stems from our understanding of God and what we experience from God. As obedient children follow the example of their parents, so, concludes Jesus, by acting in this way, in the way of the beatitudes, 'you will be children of the Most High, who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (v 35).

Likewise, given this relationship with God, the members of the community are to be 'compassionate' as their Father is compassionate. If they refrain from judging (that is, condemning others), they will avoid being judged (condemned [at the final judgment] by God)). If they forgive they will be forgiven (by God). If they are generous in giving, they will meet with an extraordinary measure of generosity in return ('a full measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap'). The principle is: 'The measure you give will

be the measure you get back'. This sense is not that God waits to see the level of human generosity before deciding how generous to be in return. God's aim from the start is to be as extravagantly generous as possible. But, just as the volume of water one can draw from a tank depends on the capacity of the vessel one brings to draw from it, so the generosity of the human 'receptacle'/ 'container', conditions the amount ('measure') God can give. Any limitation stems from the human, not the divine side.

The **First Reading**, from 1 Samuel 26, tells of an incident in the early career of David when he had become a fugitive fleeing from the jealous vengeance of King Saul. According to the account, David had a fine opportunity to kill Saul – at that time his enemy. He refused to do so because of his reverence for 'the Lord's anointed' (Saul). He willed the good of his enemy – in other words, he loved his enemy.

Despite being exiled and hunted everywhere, David still loves Saul and never seeks to harm him: all he wants to do is to sing the king out of his depression. Three times David has the opportunity to kill Saul (also his father-in-law). David's companion offers to kill Saul with his spear but David commands him to leave the Lord's anointed in peace. The incident provides a biblical precedent for the kind of attitude commended – more radically – in the Gospel.

In his own life, Jesus himself has to work hard at honouring his ethic of loving the enemy. That process was not a painless or bloodless affair: it cost Jesus everything. He offered love first, even though he knew that the return would never measure up to what was offered; he never bargained love for love; he never became involved in stock-taking returns. He always willed and chose the good of the other – whether it was his friend, stranger, or the enemy. He made a habit of confusing his enemies with love.

What Jesus is suggesting should not be confused with passivity, inaction, indifference, or resignation in the face of persecution and injustice. On the contrary! Jesus is suggesting radical action: that we believers act towards others without being asked, and that we offer friendship and pardon constantly, without asking or hoping for anything in return. We are asked to creatively absorb the aggression of our opponent, using it against him to show him the futility of violence. So when someone insults you, send back a compliment instead of an insult.

In Jesus, we find God's self-revelation, his actions in and for the world, and his plan for salvation and its fulfillment. Followers of Jesus must act in these ways precisely because they are the ways of God.