

Sermon 24 February 2019 'Love your

Enemies.'

Luke 6:27-38

'Love your enemies' – without doubt this is the most difficult and challenging of all the commandments Jesus gives us. I mean, who can put their hands on their heart and say that they genuinely love their enemies. It's a big ask. As I said last week when talking about the Beatitudes, Jesus takes the accepted responses we might have to any situation and turns them upside down. In terms of attitude and the way we are expected to respond to people, he could be quite revolutionary. But firstly we need to have a look at just what he means by *love* in this context.

In the Bible we come across four meanings of *love*. In Greek they are *philia*, which means 'affectionate regard' or 'friendship.' There is *eros*, which is what we feel for our partners. There is *storge*, which is a feeling of tenderness and affection, especially of parents and children. And then there is *agape*, which is the word used in this context.

Agape is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. It is the highest form of love in the Bible and perfectly describes the love Jesus had for God, for his followers, and indeed for all people. In the same way, it defines God's immeasurable love for mankind. It means that no matter how others might treat us, we will go out of our way to be good and kind to them. Don't tell me that is not the most difficult thing to do.

Basically, it goes completely against our natural instincts. For this reason, this form of love is something we have to consciously enact and work on. The love we feel for our partner, for our parents children and friends just happens. It is quite natural and we can't really help it. Loving those who hurt us is something quite different. Our instinctive feelings are quite the opposite, and so we have to make a very determined and conscious effort to reverse those feelings and to replace them feelings that go completely against the grain. It is because this is so very difficult to do and goes totally against our natural instincts, that it becomes such a powerful tool in terms of relationships. What we are talking about here is forgiveness, and forgiveness is the ultimate form of love. It is forgiveness that not only repairs and sustains relationships, it is really the foundation of all relationships. I include in that not only our relationships with one another, but just as importantly with God and with Jesus Christ.

How often have we made the point that to be a follower of Christ is challenging, to say the least. This commandment, 'to love our enemies', 'to forgive', is a perfect example. I am sure I am not alone when I say that I find it the most difficult aspect of Christ's teaching and direction to follow. At times, almost impossible. I think I am a bit like the elderly Virginian woman who lived to see her beloved town occupied by Union troops at the end of the American Civil War. One day she was walking down the street when she tripped and fell. A Union soldier courteously helped her up. 'How kind of you, young man', she said acidly. 'If there is a cool spot in hell, I hope you get it.' Not sure where that rates on the forgiveness scale. Bottom line, the Christian ethic is all about being positive towards others. 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. In other words, we thrive when we are treated positively, so that is simply how we need to treat others. And when we do that we grow, and if there has been any hurt, then healing takes place, and again, we grow.

A beautiful legend tells of an African tribe that ritualizes forgiveness. When a tribe member acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he/she is taken to the centre of the village. All work ceases and every man, woman and child gathers in a large circle around the accused. Then the tribe bombards the miscreant with affirmations! One at a time, they enumerate all the good the individual has done. Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with some detail and accuracy is recounted. All their attributes, strengths and kindnesses are recited carefully. Finally, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place and the outcast is welcomed back into the tribe.

What a beautiful ritual of restoration! They replace hurt with happiness, pain with peace. The relationship is restored and the person can move forward. Paul Boese, American writer and philosopher, said, 'Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.'

There is an important aspect to this commandment from Jesus that we need to take on board. On the one hand, it is certainly an attitude, a way of responding to people that reaps all sorts of benefits, and for that reason Jesus wants us to act accordingly. But let's also remember that Jesus is giving us this commandment because this is what God is like. This reflects the nature of God. The whole purpose of the existence of Jesus is to reveal to us the true nature of God, and this commandment does exactly that. We are loved unconditionally by God, no matter our faults or mistakes. There are two amazing things about these instructions. Firstly,

they are straightforward, clear, direct and quite memorable. So, they are easy to understand, if not so easy to put into practice.

Secondly, they are really quite rare. How often do we see them actually put into practice? How many people do we know that consistently live by this commandment? How many communities do we know where these guidelines are rules of life? What's gone wrong? Has God changed, or have we forgotten who he really is? I would venture to say that the latter is undoubtedly the case. I would like to finish with a true story.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa to deal with what happened under apartheid. The conflict in this period resulted in violence and human rights abuses from all sides. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a member of this Commission. A frail black woman in her seventies is in the courtroom. Facing her across the room are several white security officers from the former apartheid regime. One of them is Mr van der Broek. He has been tried and found implicated in the murders of both her husband and son.

A member of the Commission states the case clearly. It was indeed Mr van der Broek who came to this woman's house. He took her son, shot him and then burned his body. A few years later he returned with his cohorts and took her husband. For two years she heard nothing of him. Then she was fetched and taken to a spot beside the river. There she saw her husband bound and beaten, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard her husband say were, "Father, forgive them." Now this woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr van der Broek. The representative of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to the woman and asks simply, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who so brutally destroyed your family?"

"I want three things", begins the woman calmly. "First, I want to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I may gather up the dust and give him a decent burial. Secondly, my husband and my son were my only family. Therefore, I want Mr van der Broek to become my son. I would like him to come to my township weekly and spend a day with me so that I can pour out whatever love I have still remaining in me."

"Finally, I would like Mr van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness, because in the end Jesus Christ died to forgive. This would have been my husband's wish. And now,

would someone please lead me over to Mr van der Broek that
I may embrace him and let him know he is truly forgiven.'