

Sermon Sunday 19 February 2023 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

Matthew 5:38-48

There are two interesting observations about this passage. Firstly, it highlights a fundamental difference between the Old and the New Testaments. Secondly, it encapsulates what it means to be a Christian, a true, practising Christian.

Jesus begins by referring to a law deeply embedded in the Jewish religion. I quote from Exodus 21:24. *'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.'* Similarly, Leviticus. *'Anyone who injures another person must be dealt with according to the injury inflicted – fracture for fracture, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Whatever anyone who does to hurt another person must be paid back in kind.'*

These passages reflect the Jewish understanding of God, an understanding which is very much reflected in the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament we see a God who is interpreted as being judgmental and vengeful. Retribution is common. This verse from Jeremiah is what I would call typical Old Testament. *'Look! The Lord's anger bursts out like a storm, a driving wind that swirls down on the heads of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not diminish until it has finished all his plans.'* Jeremiah 30:23.

Jesus, however, gives us a very different view of God. The God we see through the person of Jesus is a very forgiving God. In fact, I would go so far to say that forgiveness is very much a hallmark of God as reflected in the person of Jesus.

However, it should be noted that these laws were actually an attempt to limit retribution. In the very earliest days blood feuds were characteristic of tribal societies. If a member of one tribe injured a member of another tribe, that was a cue for every member of that tribe to wreak havoc on all members of the tribe of the offender, and invariably the vengeance called for was nothing short of death. So this law actually attempts to limit the fallout. Retribution should be carried out only on the offender. So in this context, this is actually a law of mercy.

Jesus, however, brings a whole new take on this law. He introduces an approach which is cloaked in forgiveness. There is no retribution whatsoever. This approach really does contradict the Old Testament ethic of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' and undoubtedly reflects Jesus' approach to all relationships. Jesus preaches a message of unconditional love to all and sundry.

Forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love. It is easy to love someone who is kind to you; it is not so easy to love someone who offends or hurts you. In fact, it is very, very difficult. I know of very few people who are able to offer every single person the same level of kindness and love, no matter what the circumstance might be, no matter what offense that person might have committed. That is the mark of a true Christian. Let me share a story with you.

In November 1977 in a little suburb called Johnsonville, just out of Wellington, a six-year-old girl called Lynley Stewart went missing from her home. That evening scores of local residents and police mounted a massive search for her.

Lynley's parents, Keith and Rangi Stewart, were devout Christians. Later that evening, Lynley's body was found underneath one of the classrooms at Johnsonville Primary School. She had been strangled. The next day, a 14-year-old boy was taken into custody. He lived only a few houses away from the Stewarts.

The little community seethed with anger towards the boy. Lynley's father, Keith, was as heartbroken as any dad could be, but something quite profound happened in his heart. He had the strongest feeling that he had to go round to that boy's house and talk to his father.

The father of the boy responsible had himself been so grief-stricken by what his son had done, he had taken himself to bed feeling like his heart would break. The next thing he knew, Keith Stewart was banging on his door. He expected the worst but he saw something in Keith's eyes that was altogether unexpected.

Keith felt a divine push to go to the boy's father and offer a hand of forgiveness and prayer. In what was a most moving experience for both of them the two men embraced, Keith giving unconditional forgiveness and then prayed for healing to occur.

The point is this, the two men were then able to move on with their lives; they were able to begin living again. Years later, reflecting on what happened, Keith was quite certain that this kind of attitude doesn't occur naturally, but has to be God-given.

With regards the boy himself, as a young man he embraced Christianity, married and had two children of his own.

Back to our Gospel reading. Jesus goes on to say that we should love our enemies. What this really does is put a stamp on 'turn the other cheek.' It emphasises the message, it confirms the message. You could almost say that it takes it a step further. After all, Jesus is not referring to someone who might have hurt you, he is talking about your enemies.

However, it's important to understand this – Jesus is not asking us to love our so-called enemies in the same way that we love our nearest and dearest. That's probably taking it just a little step too far! The Greek word used for loving those really close to us is *storge*. That is not used here. The Greek word used here is *agape*, which is not so much a feeling of the heart as an attitude. It means that no matter how someone might treat us, we will regard them with benevolence and goodwill. And of course, we don't take revenge, we turn the other cheek.

In 2015 a young man names Dylann opened fire while attending a Bible study group in South Carolina, killing nine people. Felicia Sanders survived by pretending to be dead, but lost her 26-year-old son. At a bond hearing, she told Dylann, 'You have killed some of the most beautiful people I know. Every fibre in my body hurts, and I will never be the same, but I forgive you.'

How powerful is that. What incredible strength that must have taken. What incredible faith she must possess in order to be able to do that. But then forgiveness is so very powerful, and that is why forgiveness has to be the ultimate form of love.

One last point. Jesus said in verse 45, '*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*' In other words, that is what God is like – loving and forgiving, not vengeful and seeking retribution.

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