

## **Sermon 22 October 2023 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'**

### **Ephesians 4:25-32 Matthew 5:38-42**

In light of the events unfolding in Gaza, I thought I would offer a few thoughts on the Old Testament law of 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us that this law is wrong, that in fact we have to do the opposite and turn the other cheek. There are some very deep-seated issues lying at the heart of the conflict in Gaza, but I do believe that one of the factors which contribute to the seemingly never-ending cycle of violence is that the religion of both adversaries, Israel and the Palestinians, is based on the Old Testament. You may or may not know that Islam, which is embraced by the majority of Palestinians, traces its roots back to Abraham. But that is another issue.

So Jesus comes along and says that this law is wrong. He brings a whole new way of dealing with conflict. I mentioned last week that this, what to a Jew is a radical approach, was one of the reasons why the Jewish religious leaders could not accept him as the Messiah. They were looking for a warrior-type of Messiah who would conquer their enemies, not 'love' them!

In the past one hundred years we have seen leaders emerge who have brought about significant change through their philosophy of forgiveness and turning the other cheek. Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela spring to mind. They subscribed to the philosophy of Jesus, that of forgiveness, of turning the other cheek. They understood the power this gave, and of course, Jesus understood this so well, which is why he made it the cornerstone of his teaching. It takes tremendous willpower not to strike back, it takes great inner strength to forgive, which is why it is so powerful.

There is the story of John Selwyn, celebrated missionary to the South Sea Islands. He attended university where he was noted for his boxing skills. Years later, while serving in the South Pacific, he had to rebuke one of the islanders for a serious misdeed. The man became angry and struck Selwyn on the cheek with his clenched fist. Selwyn could have easily overpowered his assailant. Instead, he folded his arms and meekly turned the other cheek. Surprised by the missionary's behaviour, the islander fled into the jungle.

Years later the man came to Selwyn's successor and asked to be baptised. After determining that his conversion was genuine, the missionary asked the man what led him to be a Christian. He replied, 'John Selwyn. He taught me what Jesus was like.'

Going back to our Gospel reading, Jesus goes on to say that if anyone strikes us on the right cheek, we must turn and let them strike us on the left. It is interesting that he specifies the right cheek, because there is really only one way you can do that and that is by striking with the back of your hand. This, of course, is assuming that the striker is right-handed, which by far the majority are.

Now according to Jewish law, to hit a person with the back of your hand is twice as insulting as hitting them with the flat of your hand. As I understand it, you are treating the person you are hitting as insignificant because the action denotes a dismissing of the person, on top of the actual pain of making contact with their cheek.

So what Jesus is saying is that no matter how badly we are insulted, we must resist, we must on no account retaliate. That is hard, that takes enormous inner strength and that is why it is so effective, and that is why we look up to and respect anyone who is able to do just that.

In the end, we are talking simply about forgiveness. The problem with not being able to forgive is that it eats you up; it feeds on itself to the detriment of your own well-being, and most importantly, one is unable

to move forward in a constructive and healthy way. American psychology professor, Lewis Smedes, wrote, *'As long as our minds are captive to the memory of having been wronged, they are not free to wish for reconciliation with the one who wronged us.'*

On quite a different scale to the problems in Gaza, there is the story of a married couple who didn't speak for forty years after a fight over how much money she spent on sugar. I am sure there were other deep-seated problems but this is what brought it to a head. One day the husband took out his chain saw and sawed their house in half. He moved one of the halves behind some trees on their large section and there the two, husband and wife, lived out the rest of their days in separate half-houses.

Not for one moment am I suggesting that the root of the conflict in Gaza can be compared to a disagreement over the purchase of sugar, but I do want to make the point that if the parties involved are so deeply entrenched in the ethic of 'an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth', in other words absolutely no room for forgiveness or amnesty, then the outcome is inevitably what we are now witnessing – the death of hundreds of innocent people, including little children. It is an absolute tragedy and I fear the worst might be still to come.

I want to finish by bringing this back to a personal level, a level which you and I can relate to in the way we deal with conflict in our everyday lives. I begin by quoting from our first reading, *'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.'* Ephesians 4:32.

In 2010, Emma Woods was the New Zealand Herald New Zealander of the Year. She was not a high-flyer in terms of public profile or achievement but she did exhibit values which impacted on many people. Emma's son, Nayan, aged 4, was killed in front of her by an out-of-control teenage motorist who mounted the footpath in Christchurch in May of that year. The reaction we have come to expect from such tragedies is grief-fuelled anger and calls for tougher penalties. There was none of that from Emma. Instead, she took time to get to know the driver, Ashley Martin, aged 18, accepted he had made a terrible mistake, told him to not let it ruin his life, urged the judge not to send him to prison, and hugged him in his distress.

Emma said, *'My husband, Duncan, and I both held really similar views and we were both raised in really similar ways by quite loving families. There has definitely been anger towards the situation but it's never really seemed like a good use of energy to be angry with Ashley, because I know that wasn't going to change anything.'*

Ashley ended up with a sentence of community detention and community work for dangerous driving.

Here is how a couple of readers responded, responses which typified the reaction from so many people. *'This is not a person who has achieved greatness in sport, politics, business etc. She is, in my view, a quintessential Kiwi, displaying that most rare of qualities these days – forgiveness.'*

And another response, *'The award must go to Emma Woods. She has shown qualities that we don't see a lot of these days, including dignity, selflessness, and compassion. We could all learn so much from her. Her approach is one which gives us all a hope for a better future.'*

In the end, that's the point. We achieve so much on a personal level through forgiveness, but we can also contribute so much to a better community through the same. It doesn't call for any special gifts but it does call for courage and a significant degree of strength.

My prayer and hope is that those who hold in their hands the power to make a difference for good in the Gaza conflict, can be imbued with the ideology brought to us by Christ as reflected in our readings.

I finish with two apposite quotes. Firstly, from 19<sup>th</sup> Century writer, Josh Billings, *'There is no revenge so complete as forgiveness.'* And from Canadian author and leadership authority, Robin Sharma, *'Forgiveness isn't approving what happened. It's choosing to rise above it.'* I find that to be very meaningful.