

Sermon 20 September 2026 'Turn the other cheek.'

Ephesians 4:25-32 Matthew 5:38-48

In light of the conflicts taking place around the world, I thought I would offer a few thoughts on Jesus' directive to 'turn the other cheek.' Now, let me say from the outset, that I am not so naïve as to suggest for one moment that there should be no retaliation whatsoever to acts of aggression from a particular adversary, but I am suggesting that the prevalent mindset at the moment appears to be universally one of revenge. This does raise a couple of interesting points, and the first point I want to make is that in some cases the religion of the adversaries is based on the Old Testament. I refer to Israel and those countries that embrace Islam. You may or may not know that Islam traces its roots back to Abraham.

In our gospel reading, Jesus refers to the Old Testament law of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' which of course is simply revenge. He goes on to say that this is wrong, and in fact we should do quite the opposite, which is 'turn the other cheek.' *'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.'* Matthew 5:38-39.

So Jesus brings a whole new way of dealing with conflict. Speaking purely from a Jewish perspective, this was a radical approach, and was one of the reasons why the Jewish leaders could not really accept Jesus 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 hit Selwyn on the cheek with his clenched fist. Selwyn could easily have 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 back to Selwyn's successor and asked to be baptized. 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 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, of course, we are simply talking about forgiveness. As we have alluded to before, the problem not being able to forgive is that it eats us up; it feeds on itself to the detriment of our well-being, and most importantly, one is unable to move forward in a constructive and healthy way. American professor of psychology, 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 what is taking place on the international scene, 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 have no doubt there were other deep-seated problems but this is what brought it all to a head. One day, the husband took out his chainsaw 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 lives in separate houses.

Not for one moment am I suggesting that the conflicts we are witnessing internationally can be compared to a disagreement over the purchase of sugar, but I do want to make the point that if the parties involved, or should I say the leaders, are so deeply entrenched in the ethic of 'an eye for an eye and 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.

It comes back to that word we have alluded to recently – attitude. I repeat, I do not expect the approach of any of the leaders to be unequivocally 'turn the other cheek', but I do believe that if an attitude aligned with that of a Nelson Mandela or a Martin Luther King was to prevail, then I am sure the present situation would not be as confrontational or as dire as it is.

I do make another observation. Without wanting to get too political, I was disturbed to hear that the President of the United States was quoted as saying, 'I never forgive my enemies.' I am not sure that aligns with the teaching and philosophy of Jesus. In fact, I am quite sure it doesn't. Again, I just stress the point that it comes back to a matter of attitude. I will leave it at that.

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, because in the end, I believe everything should come back to that. I begin by quoting from our first reading, *'Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.'* Ephesians 4:31-32.

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, 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. I would like to think that our forgiveness will bring about a change in him.' Ashley ended up with a sentence of community detention for dangerous driving.

Here is how a couple of readers responded, responses which typified the reaction of 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 these days, including dignity, selflessness and compassion. We could all learn so much from her. Her attitude is one which gives us all a hope for a better future.'* There's that word 'attitude' again!

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.

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

I finish with an apposite quote from Canadian author, Robin Sharma, *'Forgiveness isn't approving what happened. It's choosing to rise above it.'* I find that very meaningful.