

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Year A - 19/2/2017

Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18
Psalm 119:33-40
1 Corinthians 3:10-17
Matthew 5:38-48

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat; give your cloak as well... Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (40-42)

This is the new lifestyle of those who follow Jesus. This is how it is in the Kingdom of God! And our response? “Ridiculous! No-one could live like that!” Fair enough. but let’s explore how we might find some sense from this apparent nonsense!

This is one of those texts where context is crucial. Remember that Jesus is speaking to oppressed people - the peasant crowds are not only victimised by Rome but by the rich Jews who collaborate and profit from the Empire. Each of these examples cited by Jesus, refers to a specific issue within the experience of his listeners. And in this context there are two dominant points of view, about how the people should respond to Roman rule, that Jesus is competing with: Either fight! Or, collaborate - be submissive and survive the best you can.

Jesus is presenting an alternative way... what he dares to call, ‘God’s way’!

“Turn the other cheek...” The strike Jesus is referring to is not a punch in a tavern brawl, but rather a slap with an open hand... a humiliating gesture designed to reinforce subservience. So it’s delivered by a powerful person to a social inferior - a Roman to a Jew; a master to a slave; a landowner to a peasant. The expected response is cowering submission - it reinforces the status quo. But Jesus says. ‘Don’t do it... don’t be submissive... but don’t retaliate with violence.

Instead muck with their brains by standing tall and calmly turning the other side of your face - let them slap that too if they want. Assert your human dignity and challenge your oppressor to recognise you as a fellow human being.’

“Give your cloak as well.” The level of peasant debt to wealthy landowners was severe... and this was normally rich Jews persecuting poor Jews. So here we have a rich creditor pursuing a peasant farmer in public court, to the last thing he owns... his coat. Jesus says, ‘Make the shame of your oppressor evident for all to see. Give him your cloak too!’. which means that the peasant would be standing in court literally naked! Jesus’ strategy is clear - Shame him publicly and remind him of his moral obligation under God’s Law, that a Jew owes a solemn duty of care to another.

“Go the second mile!” Roman soldiers were allowed to requisition labour from subject peoples. so this example refers to a soldier forcing a Jew to carry his pack. But there were legal limits - here it is only permissible to require one mile. Needless to say, the local people found this practice humiliating and hated it! But Jesus says, ‘Refuse to be humiliated. Don’t get angry, but instead cheerfully offer to go a second mile! Muck with their brains! Let that soldier spend the rest of his day worrying, “Why did that Jew do that? Is he going to report me?”’

Jesus’ strategy can be summarised as:

- don’t respond to violence with violence -
- hold onto your dignity and don’t descend to their level; but shame them into looking at you as a fellow human being, deserving of respect;
- and... love them. drive them nuts with the unexpected response of love - try to shock them into a relationship, that recognises God and your shared humanity.

Notice this is not about being wimpy or subservient! Far from it - this is about being incredibly strong... and brave... and opening yourself to risk... for the sake of God and humanity. And as Jesus goes on to make entirely clear in the following

verses... it is seeing your oppressor as a child of God too - not just standing up for your own dignity - but caring about them and their humanity too.

Our context is wildly different. Mercifully, we are not oppressed people! This text does speak to numerous contemporary contexts. Contexts of conflict... or violence and abuse... or power plays and resistance... some of which are international in scope, some of which are local and personal.

But I am sure that you have had the experience of power-plays in your personal life - either as the victim of them, or perhaps being swept up in them and finding yourself the perpetrator. And the advice of Jesus is as relevant to us as it was to the original context. This is more likely to be verbal rather than physical oppression - sometimes direct attack or criticism, but more often behind our backs; gossip, criticism, unfair expectations. And the locale of this conflict is likely to be in families, in friendship groups, in churches or at work.

These contexts are not as life-threatening as that of an oppressed nation, but still very harmful to both people and communities... and can be all-consuming to those involved. It's not always easy to see who starts it, but once an attack is perceived (whether real or not), up our defences go and it's on. Everyone involved believes they are the victims, and that they are the ones holding the moral high ground - we see our actions as purely defensive. People respond to cruel words with cruel words... with gossip to gossip... allegation to allegation. And once the cycle starts, it's often unstoppable... and it wrecks families, churches and workplaces.

Jesus says:

- don't do it... don't get sucked in;
- hold onto your dignity and don't descend to that level;
- insist on loving them, whether they want you to or not;
- and keep reaching for relationship... regardless.

It's great advice, and we know he's right. But still that voice inside wells up saying, 'That's too idealistic. No one can live like that!' And there is truth there.

Because left to our own best efforts it will prove too hard for us. But there are two steps of faith that can make all the difference... two recognitions that allow the Spirit in.

The first is to wake up each morning and remember that we are held in God's loving accepting gaze... regardless. When we come to that place in our faith journey, where we truly believe that God does love and accept us, a different perspective pokes its nose in. We go to react... and then... an alternative voice comes online, 'But hey, I know who I am in God's eyes. There's nothing to compete or fight for here. But that's only dealing with one side of the equation... and choosing not to buy into it, while helpful, is not enough. If we're left feeling angry about the behaviour of the other person, then the poison will still spread. There has to be more... and so the second step of faith is to wake up to the reality, that that same loving gaze of God that you feel, equally encompasses and holds your 'enemy'. God not only loves you - God also loves them equally as much. God showers them with sun and rain regardless of their behaviour... just as God does with us... because we are all part of His family of love... regardless.

Simply stated... I walk away from this gospel today, knowing that I have no right to do anything else but love the people around me... all of them... regardless. If I'm happy to accept that God loves me, then I've got to accept that this love extends to my 'enemies' too... and that puts me under the obligation of 'family'. Regardless of what I might perceive about the unfairness of what people say about me or do to me, the gospel requires me to reach out to them in the invitation to relationship... even if that's never ever going to be accepted.

When we can remember these two fundamentals of faith - that God loves me... and God loves them - then it is possible... imperfectly of course... to live out the spirit of today's gospel. And when this happens... the experience is liberating... the freedom and relief is blissful.

In the name of God. Amen.