

DATE: Wednesday February 16, 2022

CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington.

SERMON SERIES. Lectionary Gospel Readings

BIBLE PASSAGE: Luke 6:27-38

GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Love your enemies

When we read the Bible, one of the things we have to come to terms with is that a word that the translators used to put into English what the original Greek or Hebrew said, may not be the word that is best. Also, the English language changes over time. Who would have known even 20 years ago that we would have a verb "to google"?

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus tells us to "Love our enemies". He says it not just once, but twice. "Enemies." The Palestine where Jesus lived was occupied by the Romans – their army and their administration and their taxes. For the Jews in Jesus' day, the Romans were "enemies." The Greek word that is in The New Testament really and truly does mean "enemies" of this sort. In Australia these days we don't have many real, fair dinkum enemies of that Roman kind. So who are our enemies? We have people who don't like us ... people whose personalities and ways of speaking and doing things we don't approve ... people with whom we have had a disagreement and who hold a grudge against us ... people who have given us a raw financial deal such as a builder who has done a botched job and refuses to make it right ... an ex-spouse with whom we have a thorny relationship ... a fellow worker whose work ethic and commitment is below your own standards or who has clambered his or her way to the top over the backs of other, more deserving colleagues ... I'm struggling to find a word here that describes these people as a group rather than the word "enemy." I'm tempted to say that a better phrase is a person who is a "pain the proverbial," but I have to remember that we are all respectable, nice Anglicans here. But you get what I mean.

Jesus says that if we are his followers, we are to "love" such people. If you're looking for a nice, comfortable religion that doesn't call for too many demands on your life, makes you feel better when you're down, and will reserve luxury suites for you in heaven when you die, then you probably shouldn't try to be one of Jesus' disciples. He is demanding. He has the crazy notion that his followers should serve others rather than themselves. He expects them to show integrity when no one is looking. And he expects them to love. Not just people who only occasionally have a bad day. But enemies. Jesus expects you to "love your enemies." Don't follow him unless you're ready to experience some discomfort.

So we have struggled with the word "enemies," but we get the general idea of what is meant. Now we have to struggle with the word "love." Jesus uses the strongest and best word for "love" that he could – agape – ἀγάπη. Agape is a constant attitude that always seeks the benefit of the other person. If that's what the word means in language, what does the word mean in practice?

Maybe I can say a few things about what I think it doesn't mean. Please get that ... this is what I think. I don't have any definitive, correct answers. The point of a sermon is to help you to think through things for yourself, rather than present you with a complete, gift-wrapped finished product.

I don't think that loving our enemies means that we invite them to our home for dinner. Some people may be able to do that. But on the whole, no. I don't think that loving our enemies means that we take them to a movie or to the footy. Again, some people may be able to do that, but on the whole, no.

Jesus spells out some of the implications for what it means to “love our enemies.” He said in our gospel reading, “Do good to those who hate you.” In other words, don’t get involved in acts of revenge, of getting your own back. “Do good,” don’t do evil to them. In whatever relationship you have with your “enemies,” behave towards them in a way that is at least positive and helpful, so that the relationship doesn’t become even more sour than it was. Let the framework of your relationship with that person be the sort of framework that allows them to live as well as they can, and also allows you to live as well as you can.

Jesus also said in our reading, “Bless those who curse you.” When you think of the person who is saying perhaps negative and maybe untrue things about you, find ways to work positives into your thought about them. When you are with friends, instead of complaining about their unjust treatment of you, go out of your way to say something positive about your “enemies.” Would you do this to shame them? No -- though it will shame them. But you would do it so that in your own heart you are learning to love them as Jesus said. And if you can’t say something positive, say nothing at all, rather than fuelling the flames.

Jesus also said in our reading, “Pray for those who abuse you.” When you're praying, you probably pray for your family and your friends. Why don't you begin to pray and intercede for your enemies? Actively. Jesus did this. As he hung on the cross Jesus looked at those who were crucifying him, Romans and Jews, and prayed for them. ‘Father, forgive them; for they don’t know what they’re doing.’ (Luke 23:34). Start to ask God to help your enemies. Ask God to heal the hurts in their lives that are some of the motivators of their evil actions. Ask God to bless them and show mercy to them. Would you do this to shame them? No, you would do it in order to find it in your heart to love them as Jesus said.

At the end of today’s reading Jesus gave us his positive version of “The Golden Rule.” “And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them.” (Luke 6:31). Do you want people to love you? Then love them, including your enemies. Do you want people to do good to you? Then do good to others, including your enemies. Do you want people to bless you? Then bless others. Do you want people to pray for you? Then pray for others. If you really want the “pains in the proverbials” in your life to treat you decently, then you must treat them decently.

As I said back at the start, following Jesus is not nice, comfortable and undemanding. He demands radical thinking and behaviour from us. He overturns what seems to be natural, vengeful behaviour and requires his followers to do the same. Jesus is the Prince of Peace – and he works through us and with us each day to bring his peace to the world where we happen to be, as we, too, “Love our enemies.”