

Listening and Doing

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

I feel I am probably due Donald Trump royalties. Me and many other preachers and not a few journalists. The amount of sermon material that man has generated in the last few weeks has been astonishing. For anyone entering any form of leadership, or exercising any form of leadership, as an elder, a Moderator, a teacher, a business person, a parent, a doctor, or a politician, there are lessons to be learned about attitude, competence, purpose, vision, team-work, integrity and common-sense – both in a positive and negative sense – flying at us from across the Atlantic.

Being at ease in your own skin, knowing what you are and what you are not, does not simply apply to those in high office. It applies to every single one of us. It is not something only for institutions, it is for individuals.

One of the greatest challenges any of us face is how do we cope with people we don't like, don't trust, and don't understand. In the collected sayings of Jesus there are a couple of corkers this morning. At a cursory glance they seem like a horrendous burden on any Christian disciple.

The first is that we are called to love our enemies. Jesus often says things that make us chafe: He challenges the disciples to do things that seem contrary to human nature. When Jesus quotes the Old Testament saying about 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' – He knows the Law. He knew that the intent was not about a proportionate response to evil, it was about equalising the suffering. Jesus knows the desire, living under Roman occupation, to seek retaliation against violence done, but teaches that this provokes worse violence, and the cycle spirals out of control.

When people do wrong things, bad things, even evil things, many are of the opinion that a little bit of smiting wouldn't go amiss. Jesus says, 'No'. Our Christian faith will undoubtedly be judged by how we treat the people we love and like; but it will also be judged by how we treat the people we loathe. We are to love our enemies. We might be tempted to find some comfort in

another old saying about we always hurt the ones we love. But that's not really what this is about. When we listen to what Jesus has to say, it is not enough simply to keep the words in our heads and in our hearts. Those words need to be put into action. Christianity is about hearing and doing.

Jesus' instruction that we are to love our enemies, that we are to go the second mile, that we are to turn the other cheek makes no bones about the fact that this is a counsel of perfection. It appears as an impossible demand. It seems unreasonable. But He says it, and He means it.

So this morning, I want you to think about somebody that you really don't like. I'm guessing at the moment that might be me making you think about these hard things. But think about somebody whose attitude to life, to work, to you makes you angry and resentful. What would it take for you to love them? Maybe not to like them, but to love them. What would they have to change or become, or stop doing or being that would make you able to love them? Got that in your mind?

Now, here's the hard part. With this unpleasant, difficult, awkward person firmly in your mind, what would you have to change or become or stop doing in yourself that would make you able to love them?

And I think that's what Jesus is driving at here. Sure, it would be great if we could find the buttons to push, the levers to pull, to make a bad person better. But I don't think that will be possible until we sort ourselves out, not just shrugging shoulders and saying, 'well, that's just the way I am, I can't lower my standards or change my beliefs', but by saying, 'this hurtful, harmful, unpleasant man or woman' remains one of God's children. Broken; tarnished; twisted. Maybe inexcusable, but surely not unforgivable. Loving your enemy can only begin if we look at our own abilities to forgive, which does not mean forgetting, so that the first change that takes place takes place not in your enemy, but in you.

Does that make you a doormat? Does that make you a pushover? Does that make you spineless? Does that make you weak?

Oh Jesus, give us a break! Cut us some slack! It's hard enough to love our neighbours. But our enemies too?

Martin Luther King Jr: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." Assassinated, but we remember his example.

The Dalai Lama: "In the practice of tolerance one's enemy is the best teacher." Persecuted and in exile, but we remember his example.

Nelson Mandela: "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." Imprisoned for decades, but we remember his example.

Desmond Tutu: "If you want peace you don't talk to your friends, you talk to your enemies." Ridiculed and mocked for decades, but we remember his example.

When Jesus says we are to love our enemies, we are meant to listen, and then, gritting our teeth, squaring our shoulders, we are meant to do. Who knows, it may very well change them. But as important, dare I say even more important, it may change us.

Which leads me to the second impossible thing Jesus asks of His followers. "Be perfect." Not be pretty good. Not be prepared. Not be all that you can be. But be perfect. Unless you're Mary Poppins and practically perfect in every way, what are we, disciples of Jesus, to make of this instruction?

A commentator doesn't let us off the hook but gives us a little more to think about. "Perfection is not an accumulation of good deeds, restrained actions, and pure desires. Perfection is a state of being, and if Jesus is to be believed, it is our birth-right. The 'command to be perfect is not a call to devout and holy action: it is an invitation to self-recognition...to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect means neither more nor less than to be who we already are, in God's image."ⁱ

What is the perfection of God? To answer extreme evil with extreme good. To respond to extreme selfishness with extreme generosity. To answer extreme hate with extreme love. Is Jesus being serious with this? The truth is Jesus is being really serious.

If we listen to Jesus, we must be doers of the things Jesus says. “Can we challenge the Church, and ourselves, to turn the other cheek, to share its goods, to go the second mile? Can we challenge the church to give to those who beg and to lend to those who are in need? Can we challenge the church to love its own enemies, within and without, and to pray for those who persecute the church? Can we challenge the church to go deeper and to be that kind of extreme church in the world?”ⁱⁱ Can we be such an extreme church, extreme in our loving and sharing and forgiving and caring and accepting and welcoming that we will not be ignored, not waiting for others to do it, but do it ourselves? Can we be such an extreme Church that somebody would want to be part of it?

To be perfect is not to add pressure to already overwhelmed lives; instead it is to assure us that we are not alone in the world and that God continues to work in us and through us. Perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves. God’s kingdom is already active and moving, and it is active and moving in you, right now. Listen to it; do it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ William F Brosend II, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1 p114

ⁱⁱ Steven P Eason, *ibid*, p115