

Doing unto others

Genesis 45:3-11; Luke 6:27-38

A commentator notes that, "Congregations respond to this text in the same way as...children respond to seeing cooked spinach on their dinner plate. No matter how (the nutritional value is explained), no one really wants to dig in."ⁱ Jesus in His Sermon on the Plain prescribes an ethic of generosity for Christians living in a hostile world. Yet even though we know enough to understand how Bible texts are bound to culture and time, and can often transcend from Bible times to our times, we know that this text goes down hard, no matter how we serve it up. How on earth are we supposed to love our enemies, the people who would do us harm?

Try telling that to victims of serious crime faced with the possibility of encountering those who have harmed them through the early release from prison scheme; or grieving Israeli families when the wrong body was sent home; or shell-shocked Palestinian families with nowhere to live; or homeless refugee Ukrainians in our country with nowhere to return to because of Russian bombing.

How fuller would the church be if I were to preach sermons on 'Three Easy Steps to Love', or 'Five Paths to a Better Life.' If Jesus had preached either of these sermons on the Mount or on the Plain, life would have been so much easier. Jesus, however, focussed on the real problems in life, the vast difference between what we want and what we need. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Be the bigger person. Model the better way of living, but be prepared for the unscrupulous and the unprincipled and the down-right nasty to take advantage of your good nature.

The theme of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you is, I suspect, to be found in most of the major world religions and philosophies. Of course, I am reminded of the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw's ironic observation that the idea is not without its pitfalls: "Do not do unto others as you expect they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same." Nevertheless, do unto others as you would have them do unto you is a pretty good, but incredibly difficult, standard by which to order your life.

The Golden Rule – it's not unique to Jesus, or to Luke. Matthew has his version of the rule. Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher living in Alexandria, in Egypt had a similar rule, as did the Ancient Greek poet Homer.

Jesus' Golden Rule in Luke's Gospel calls for a radical new interpretation and practice. In following Jesus, Christians enter a radically new reciprocal giving and receiving with God, and with others. In fact, Luke takes away the godward dimension and makes it clear that it is the human dimension that this aspect of faith must deal. How we treat our neighbours; how we treat our enemies, and how we treat ourselves. Matthew's Golden Rule tells us to be perfect, like God. Luke tells us don't always be gazing up to heaven piously; do something about what you believe. God is merciful, so we must be merciful. God is forgiving, so we must be forgiving. God has shown us mercy and forgiveness, more than we could ever repay, so we, in turn, must show our mercy, our forgiveness, regifting what we have received from God.

How much you hate someone may determine how much you are hated. How much you love others may determine how much you are loved. Jesus is talking about not what is, but what should be. Do to others means love your enemies. All the revenge plots, suicide bombings and broken relationships will be done away with if the human race listens to Jesus' words; and obeys them. Matthew's Jesus preaches from the mountain. Luke's Jesus comes down from the mountain and

preaches on the plain, in order that we might see Jesus, face to face. In order that we might see God, face to face. Not only what God looks like, but says; not only what God says, but does. Not only what God models, but what God encourages us to do and to be.

Hatred and grudge-holding is corrosive. We know that, but somehow we can't quite stop ourselves. Our hearts and souls are burned away and made ragged by the seething hatred and dislike and desire for vengeance that we often harbour in our lives. "I can never forgive...I can never forget..." and another acid-tipped dagger pierces our hearts, slices our souls, and we die a little more to the goodness we were made for. An honest person a few weeks ago told me how they were struggling with their New Year's resolution. They'd resolved to be better, kinder, more generous in their thinking, more forgiving in their behaviour, more tolerant in their attitude, more gracious in their speech. And then some numpty comes along and does and says every stupid thing you could ever think about, and all those default bad behaviour patterns, so struggled with to keep in control, seep out, and old habits, knee-jerk reactions, over-hasty words, lethal judgements bubble out of our lives. And we're back at the bottom of the hill of our aspirations, except this time it feels more like a mountain than a hill we have to climb if we want to get better. We live in a world, today, drenched by hate and anger. Often the anger is displaced because of people's sense of frustration with everything that is wrong with the world. We take out our anger on those around us, directly and indirectly. The cruelty and hatred we see and hear in news reports, the deadening and depressing and frustrating effect it has on our morals and ethics and behaviour feels like we have accepted the legitimizing of revenge, and cruelty, and judgementalism. It's one of the reasons preachers, and others, call out unacceptable words and behaviour wherever it is to be found – in the world of politics and economics; in the world of diplomacy and military action; in education, commerce and the arts. In a world pockmarked by prejudice, including the religious

world, Jesus' words, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' need to sound out again and again.

Because these words can, if we put them into practice, shape worlds, shape lives, shape us and those around us. They are the rule by which life should be lived. And it's hard, and it's tough, and it's counter-cultural, but that's what it takes to shock the world into an awareness of what it is doing and what it has become. The same with individuals. "I love you, but I don't like what you are doing or how you are behaving and it needs to stop, or it needs to change."

There is more 'shock and awe' in unmerited kindness and generosity than there will ever be in a blitzkrieg or a 'let all hell break loose' mentality. That would not be an act of weakness, that would not be becoming a doormat. Turning the other cheek, being generous without expectation of return, takes a toughness and a bigger-hearted compassion that the pettiest meanness, or the vilest violence. Who knows, it may indeed be the kind of thing, when added up, that might soften hearts, open minds, change lives.

That is the dilemma. How do we move from the natural instinct to match blow for blow and word for word? To put it another way, how do we live our lives responding with grace and kindness, instead of reacting with words or actions that seek to answer hurt with more hurt?ⁱⁱ

The kind of bigger-hearted, bigger-visioned response Joseph in the Old Testament reading who nearly killed him, then sold him into slavery, had when he encountered his villainous brothers years later. He turned the other cheek; he showed mercy where vengeance would have been the norm; he turned away from the eye-for-an-eye-tooth-for-a-tooth approach to, 'do unto others what you would have them do unto you.'

What, then, shall we do? Jesus says: 'Do not judge...do not condemn...forgive...give...' If we do not apply these, wrestle with them, clutch at them and bring them into the way we live, then what

good is our faith, for it will not have touched the way we live our lives. Break the expected cycle of retribution. Break the mean selfishness with unexpected, undeserved generosity. Think before you react, and discover, perhaps to your surprise, that you can do these things, be that person, if not first time round and always, then sometimes and eventually. Set the example, and maybe inspire others to be the same.

Tough? Yes. Naïve? In the world's eyes, of course. Possible? Just. Necessary? Absolutely yes.

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

Amen

ⁱ Vaughn Crowe-Tipton, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 1* p381

ⁱⁱ Charles Bugg, *ibid*, p382