

EPIPHANY 7 20-02-2019 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 45.3-11. 15; Psalm 37.1-11, 40-41; 1 Corinthians 15.35-50; Luke 6.27-38

(Jesus said) 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

Who remembers the 'Golden Rule'? What does it say?

This is one definition: "The Golden Rule is the principle of treating others as one's self would wish to be treated. It is a maxim that is found in many religions and cultures."

The short version is 'Do as you would be done by'.

Jesus, in Luke's gospel, said, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

This seems like a good rule for life; common sense, good sense. Is it easy though?

How about when Jesus also says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Surely that's going too far; how can I be expected to love and care for somebody who hates me, or has been cruel or abusive to me? How can I forgive someone who has badly hurt me or someone I love?

So no- it isn't easy.

Jesus said, 'If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also...' What, now I'm supposed to let someone bash me?

These and other Bible teachings can be used- and have been used- to perpetuate abuse, for instance by telling wives to stay with their abusive husbands. Christians can be persuaded that Jesus wants us all to be doormats.

I don't believe that's what Jesus meant at all, so it's worth looking at what he said in the context in which he said it: to ordinary, poor people, in first century Israel, under Roman occupation.

'Turning the other cheek', like many other Biblical sayings, has long been part of our everyday language. A person is said to 'turn the other cheek' if they don't retaliate or respond to violence with violence. What did Jesus mean when he said it?

The scholar Walter Wink explains that this is about subverting the power structures of the time. He says that at the time of Jesus, striking someone of a 'lower class' with the back of the hand was used to assert authority and dominance.

When I am facing you, and give you a back-hander, I'll hit your right cheek. If you turn your face and present your left cheek- I can't swipe it with the back of my right hand.

In those times, as is still the case in some cultures, the left hand was used for unclean purposes- nobody would hit a person with the left hand- so a back-handed strike on the left cheek would not be performed. You just wouldn't do it.

An alternative would be a slap with an open hand or a punch in the face, but that would be seen as a statement of equality.

You would only slap or punch someone you considered to be your social equal. So by turning the other cheek a person would be claiming- and demanding- equality.

Therefore, if I was a Jewish peasant and I "turned the other cheek," to a Roman centurion who was cross with me, he would be faced with a dilemma. Would he treat me as an equal with an open-handed slap or a punch in the face? Not likely.

This kind of non-violent resistance challenges the powerful. It is not about being meek and submissive; it is about refusing to engage in violence, while quietly subverting the power of the aggressor. Jesus knew exactly what he was asking people to do. This is the way Martin Luther King taught people to resist.

What about loving enemies? I don't imagine that anyone got up this morning and got ready for church, saying to themselves, "I'd really like to be challenged today; I hope the sermon is about loving my enemy or letting people take my stuff or something incredibly difficult like that."

This is hard teaching- if we take it seriously. At times it has been diluted, softened, or watered-down by preachers to make it sound more acceptable to us in our 21st century affluent consumer society.

But this teaching is intended to challenge us! If you remember last week's Gospel reading about the beginning of this Sermon on the Plain, Jesus looked his disciples in the eyes as he said these challenging words to them.

So how on earth can I begin to love my enemies? What does it mean to treat others as I would want to be treated? We need to remember that it is not in our own strength and by our own efforts that we grow more like Jesus, but in the grace of God. God's grace through the Holy Spirit within us helps us to love, to pray, and to grow.

God's Spirit, living in us, helps us to pray and to change, to respond as the Spirit calls us in new directions. Some changes we need to make might be small, like deciding to spend a bit more time in prayer every day. Some might be bigger and tougher; and sometimes we might need the support of another person.

Shortly, we will officially welcome Grahame Bowland to St Nicolas' as a Candidate in Formation on a Supervised Theological Field Education placement with us this year. Grahame is in his third year of formation for Ordained Ministry, and is also studying for a Masters of Divinity at Trinity College, Melbourne.

Grahame is responding to a tough call; putting your hand up and saying, "I think God is calling me to be a priest" puts you in a vulnerable position, involving the discernment of many others and entailing a great deal of hard work.

Grahame needs our prayerful support as he continues to learn and grow into his calling.

Most Christians are not called to serve in this kind of role; but every one of us is called to love, to give, and to forgive. If this seems too hard, too high a standard, something we mere mortals cannot possibly achieve- you are right, it is, IF we don't ask God to help us. The Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus enables us to do more than we can dare to hope. So let's get out there and love people.

The Lord be with you.