

Epiphany 7 Luke 6:27-38

Today's gospel reading challenges us to do what is possibly the most difficult and counter cultural practice we have in the Christian faith, love your enemies. Now you might be thinking that you have no enemies, which is wonderful if that's true, but the challenge goes further than to confine your good works to enemies. We are also challenged to bless those who curse us, give to everyone who asks of us, and even to reward the bad behaviour of taking something we own by offering to give more in response. How many of us can truly say we always live up to this teaching of Jesus?

It has often been a criticism of Christians that as a group we are weak and fall victim to being manipulated by others because of a misunderstanding of this teaching and others like it. People imagine that Jesus left us with no choice but to be doormats to others who would walk all over us. On the face of it this reading suggests just that, how else would we describe how it looks when people faced with disrespectful and unpleasant behaviour simply do nothing and let it pass?

But think about it, are we really displaying a weak response when we refuse to retaliate to poor behaviour, like for like, or are we in fact displaying enormous strength? Jesus tells us that there is nothing clever about being nice to those who are nice, everyone does that. There is nothing heroic about lending things to people from whom you expect repayment with the understanding that if repayment isn't made you will no longer lend to them and may even respond punitively or retributively. Our call as Christians is to love, and love as we know from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians which we heard just the other week, keeps no score of wrongs and bears all things. Jesus is simply showing us here what truly loving people looks like.

Moreover, the love we show others is unconditional in response to the unconditional love we have received from God. We don't love people who love us first – we take the risk in the strength of God, and make no mistake, loving others is a risky business because it hurts when we are rejected. However, that is no reason not to love. It all comes down to motivation, are we motivated to follow Christ's command in order to get something in return, or are we motivated to follow Christ's command because we have already received by grace all that we could ever need, a knowledge and experience of the love God has for us.

When we say we will be kind to some people but not others, we have lost our Christian motivations. When our compassion for certain people in our community, or in the wider world, runs out because we feel wronged or threatened by them, we have veered off course. When we are rejected by those we would wish had accepted us and we let ourselves feel embittered by that, we have misunderstood what it is to be a follower of Jesus.

Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, offer more to those who would take from you what is rightfully yours. Those are Jesus' expectations of us, that is what transformed living looks like, and they are not the actions of cowards or frightened people, these are the actions of those filled with the confidence of the Holy Spirit. Loving our enemies is counter cultural in a world where we are encouraged to look out for ourselves. Blessing those who curse us is a subversive act which encourages the establishment of the Kingdom of God here and now. This is the work of the strongest and bravest of us, this is the work God calls us to.

We will not always live up to these expectations, we will not always get this right. That is the joy of a life lived in love, we too are the recipients of unconditional love from God. When we find ourselves going down a road of exclusion or hatred, we can come back, God will be beaconing us, calling us, forgiving us and leading us anew down the path of peace and love. We need to continually grow in this teaching, to be self-reflective and mindful of others and this will take a lifetime to never quite get right, but that is no excuse to stop trying. We are not the first generation to struggle with this, we will not be the last, but have much wisdom to draw upon as we seek to walk love's path. The following quote was found on the walls of the Home for Children in Calcutta established by Mother Teresa although it's origin is disputed.

“People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway. What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway. Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

Jesus is saying just this in the gospel today and that is the challenge we leave with, when you think and speak and do whatever you think or speak or do, be motivated by your relationship with Christ and you will be unable to anything other than respond with love to whatever is before you.