

Two wrongs don't make a right

Sunday 19th February 2017

Matthew 5:38-48



Like many of you, I have travelled a lot in my lifetime. These days my wife and I have a particular interest in Europe and we long to return to explore the treasures of Florence, Venice, Milan and Paris. But one of the most unlikely places I have been - which is about as far off the tourist track as one can get - is North Korea.

It's a sad, tragic land. Often referred to as a rogue state, North Korea is a country of gulags or secret prisons where people simply disappear. Whole communities starve to death while money is poured into the military. Recently Michael Kirby, a former Australian High Court judge, compiled a report which found the North Korean regime to be one of "unimaginable cruelty". Kim Jong-un, the despotic leader will do anything to stay in power as he removes and kills rivals. He reportedly had his uncle executed and it now seems that Kim Jong-un had his own half brother murdered last week in Malaysia. Indeed, the half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, was seen as a potential rival to the leader.

On the three occasions I visited North Korea in the course of my work I was constantly monitored by secret police. Here use of the Bible is strictly controlled. I couldn't share its contents with anyone. One could take a Bible into North Korea for personal use only and, if so, you had to produce it to the authorities on the way out. If you couldn't then you would be detained. In today's world this may sound like a fairytale - but it's true!

Now, with all these things in mind, I can understand why Kim Jong-un and his North Korean cohorts object to the scriptures, particularly Jesus' Sermon on the Mount - and especially the passage we read today: *turn the other cheek, go the second mile, surrender not only your coat but your cloak as well, give to anyone who begs from you, love your enemies* - wow!

(2)

In an interview some time ago it's clear that even Donald Trump, the US President, also has problems with this passage. Trump suggested the Old Testament (not the New Testament) injunction *"any eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"* was one of his favorite Bible passages!

We may gasp here but Donald Trump's preference probably resonates with where most people are at. For, I too, struggle with Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter five. It seems hard and it appears to be unreasonable. But, you see, the disturbing thing is that this teaching is foundational to being a Christian.

Listen to the text once again:

"You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Friends, it's important that we carefully listen to this text. For many of the problems people have with Jesus' words often come as a result of not succinctly understanding what is actually being said. For example, the exhortation to *"not resist an evil doer"*, when read in the original Greek actually translates as *"to not violently resist"*. Here Jesus doesn't want us to become doormats or be constantly subjected to the cruelty and abuse of others. Rather, Jesus wants us to make a stand against evil-doers through non-violent action.

Likewise, the call to turn the other cheek requires some careful thinking. For you see, the practice of striking or slapping another's cheek was carried out in the context of a master-servant relationship.

Here overlords would chastise or admonish their subjects with a slap to the right cheek using the back of their right hand. It was meant to put the servant or slave in their place. Indeed, it was all about the master exerting their rank, their privilege and their power over a so-called inferior. It was not a fistfight!

And here Jesus really puts the cat among the pigeons. For, he says to the slave, after being slapped turn your head to your master to expose your left cheek. Apart from the fact the master would find it very hard to slap the left cheek with the back of his right hand (moreover, one never used the left hand because it was considered to be unclean), such an action by the slave is really one of defiance. Meanwhile it serves to ridicule and even humiliate the master because it's virtually impossible to strike the slave in this way.

Do you see what's going on here? Jesus is actually seeking to empower those who are vulnerable and weak. Through acts of defiance and by making a stand, those who humiliate and oppress are shamed. They are clearly disarmed.

Friends, here it's not a case one wrong evoking or justifying another. Rather, it's a call to follow a different way, a way that catches the perpetrator out by doing things differently.

(3)

Now we come to the act of surrendering one's coat. Jesus' audience would have predominantly been ordinary peasant folk from the province of Galilee. Most had nothing more than the clothes they wore. The coat was an outer garment. Giving this up would expose people in their undergarments or their underwear.

Here Jesus says give up your cloak as well. Give up your undergarment or underwear - and this means one is to be left to go naked!

Such a proposition was quite preposterous because it would bring embarrassment and shame to the one doing the suing. To force, even common folk, into a state of public nudity, would cast a degree of dishonor and disgrace over those who rule. It's definitely not a good look!

Here Jesus is really taking the "mickey" out of those who act to exploit others. Meanwhile Jesus is empowering the poor in their potential to embarrass, to humiliate and bring down the reputation of those who run the show.

Again the wrong of exploiting others is not to be met with the wrong of retaliation or pay-back. Rather, Jesus empowers the vulnerable as the complete absurdity of it all is highlighted!

Jesus then moves on to refer to the decree calling upon locals to carry the pack of a Roman military officer one mile. And what does Jesus say - he says carry the pack an extra mile!



Again, Jesus is setting things up as he moves the initiative away from those who persecute. Jesus does so as he enables those who are abused to assert their independence and express their right to make choices.

The wrong imposed by the law is not met with the wrong of disobedience. Rather, Jesus offers a new way where those whose liberties are grossly restricted are given the right to make their own decisions and to assert their own independence.

Finally, in this particular section, Jesus calls on people to give to everyone who begs and to never refuse anyone who wants to borrow.

(4)

Friends, this is a bit of a minefield, especially in our day as so many charities compete for our dollar and even where, in West Epping, there are numerous calls to support fundraisers. Moreover, what are we to do if there is knock on the door at night from a homeless person? Or how are we to respond when a boat load of asylum seekers turn up on our shores?

It seems to me that Jesus is creating a new kind of world where there are no insiders or outsiders, where everyone is equally valued and where everyone's needs are met.

Here Jesus is calling on us to relate to people as though they, too, are part of our inner family circle. Would you refuse your son if he ran out of cash? Would you turn your back on your daughter if she was being threatened by another? Jesus says we are part of a bigger family where everyone matters.

So, the wrong of insistent begging or the so-called illegality associated with asylum seeking does not justify us shutting the door. Rather, Jesus calls for a radically new way - a way that involves openness and a complete generosity of heart that is normally only exercised within the tight family circle.

In the second section of this passage Jesus speaks clearly about loving our enemies. Perhaps this is the most difficult call of all. As I prepared this sermon I was looking for some images to put up on the screen. One image that popped up numerous times was a sketch of Jesus carrying the pack of Nazi SS officer. I froze for a moment and thought this was going a bit too far - can a Jewish person ever consider such an action after the abomination that was the holocaust?

Then there are those who have been brutalized by IS. And, as we remember the 75th anniversary of the fall of Singapore, there are those who have suffered the torment and the agony of Changi and the Burma railway. Today there are those suffering under the murderous regime of Kim Jong-un.

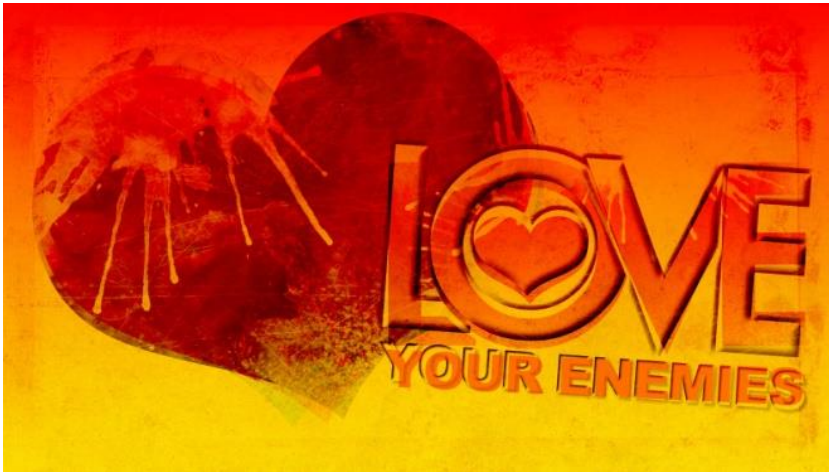
The late Martin Luther King gives me some direction here when he said Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, not to like them.

For you see, Jesus' call to love is not an emotive thing. It doesn't mean we have to be nice to those who hurt us. It doesn't mean we have to agree or indeed tolerate what they are doing.

Rather, to love means we are to recognize humanity in the other. To love says we are to affirm everyone is created by God. To love calls on us to see worth in the other no matter how much we dislike or disagree with them.

But loving one's enemies also says hating the other leads us nowhere. Hate reinforces the status-quo. When people hate they just go round and round. Here two wrongs clearly do not make a right as hate creates a spiral where things just do not progress. Rather, they become more acute, they become more intense and more violent. Just look at what's happening in the Middle East today.

(5)



Friends, love is different. Love opens us to possibilities. Love forges a way forward. Love redeems. Love converts. Love transforms. Love leads to real changes. Just look at what a difference God's love makes to the world around you. Just think about what God's love has done for you and what it continually means for you. Indeed, just imagine if God's expression of unconditional love changed to a justifiable form of vengeance and retribution?

Where would we be then?

Jesus concludes his teaching with a reference to being perfect. *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* To be honest, I sighed a little after reading this. Are you *"perfect"*? Do you ever see yourselves as being *"perfect"*?

Well, there is an important explanation here. Again English translations are not always helpful. The term Jesus uses for being *"perfect"* is actually related to the Greek word *"telos"*. This does not refer to a state of moral perfectionism. Rather to be *"perfect"* is to *"grow up"*. It is to become *"mature"*, to *"reach a goal"* and to *"become that which God intends for us"*.

Jesus uses a form of this expression when he dies on the cross with the words *"it is accomplished"* or *"it is finished"* (John 19:30).

So, to be *"perfect"* is to be guided and nurtured by God's spirit, it is to make that journey God requires for each and everyone of us. It is to accomplish that which God calls us to do and to be.

Friends, Jesus really challenges us today. In a nutshell Jesus says two wrongs don't make a right. And in doing so Jesus offers us a new way - a way that is liberating, a way that is empowering and way that takes us forward.

(6)

This means we are no longer locked into a cycle of fear, coercion and greed. This means we are no longer held ransom by brick walls, blind alleys or dead ends. For, in Christ, love triumphs over hate, kindness and mercy triumph over anxiety and suspicion, peace and reconciliation triumph over anger and violence.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, two wrongs don't make a right.

Jesus gives a new way.

And this, my friends, is the Gospel of our Lord!

To God be the glory, now and forever.

Amen.

John Barr

