

Epiphany 7
19/2/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Leviticus 19:1, 2, 9-18
Psalm 119:33-40
Matthew 5:38-48

Love your enemies. Seriously.

Most of us are familiar with the trick question about what happens when an irresistible force encounters an immovable object. In our gospel reading today we hear something of the same kind of intrinsic contradiction: do not resist an evil doer but *love your enemies*.

Though it can also be used in much shallower ways, with the word “love” we a deep gift passing between people; it is within this richer scope that Jesus uses the term here. The word enemy, on the other hand, is such a strong one that we almost seem to avoid using it in our culture; it is more a story-book word, or something which someone else – usually a long way away – might use about us more than we about them. Nevertheless, despite some squeamishness we might have about the word, we feel the clash in Jesus’ injunction, “love your enemies”.

These are the fifth and sixth in a series of “...but I say to you...” intensifications of the legal tradition we have been hearing over the last few weeks. Yet these two seem to have a different character about them. The other intensifications have been about my approach to world around me; these ones are about my very being. Enemies are a threat to me; they challenge my right to be as I am.

Because of this difference, the question which arises in us in response to today’s injunctions is different from that of the previous ones. We have heard in the last couple of weeks that dismissing another person out of hand is a kind of murder, that reducing people in our minds to objects of sexual gratification is a kind of adultery, that swearing oaths is a kind of dishonesty. And the challenge there – noting its virtual impossibility – seems to be that we improve our performance in such things: that we become more moral people. Of course, there is nothing at all wrong with that, attempted in the grace of God.

But this is not the case with the command to love our enemies, because now things are reversed: *we* are the ones being dismissed out of hand – killed in someone’s heart, who are reduced to an object as an object of another’s lust, who are deceived with half-truths. While Jesus has already said that we are not to do such things, we now are asked to “love” – to bless, to pray for – those who behave in such ways, or worse, towards us.

How does *that* work?

If we mean by this question, How does this improve our situation?, then we will find no satisfactory answer. Loving our enemies in the way that Jesus describes is not a political *strategy*. It is not a *means* to peace or reconciliation, such that if I do *this* loving thing in a situation of opposition then *that* beneficial outcome will be the result. Loving our enemies is not a means to a social, political end. Meekness is not a method towards a better world. Paraphrasing the philosopher of Ecclesiastes, someone has observed that the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but that’s the way to bet!

Those who love their enemies will often see no benefits; the meek are often crushed. Loving our enemies does not “work” at all. Is this not the meaning of Christ on the cross, that the system cannot be fixed by its own logic?

If there is a logic in loving our enemies it is strictly a theo-logic of this particular God. St Paul writes: while we were weak, Christ died for the ungodly; while we still were sinners, Christ died for us; while we were *enemies* God reconciled us through the death of his Son (Romans 5). Even here, there is no *mechanism* by which Jesus’ refusal to resist his enemies brings peace. God’s triumph in Jesus is that Jesus did not let his likely death on the cross define him, but rather was defined by God himself, the source of life. Jesus’ life, his path to the cross and his resurrection are signs which point to where true life is to be found, and signs of how deathly some apparently life-giving things are.

Such a way of life may or may not effect peace in our little time and space, but that is not the point for us as Christian disciples. The point is becoming “children of your Father in heaven”, becoming in our living towards all others as God has been towards us. Learning to love those who oppose us springs from a recognition that any enmity between us and God was also an enmity between us and others. If we have been forgiven our opposition to God, we have been forgiven our opposition to others, and now we are to be towards others as we confess God has been towards us. In this we become more God-like.

The command to love our enemies is not about *changing* our enemies. It is about being changed ourselves. It is about our not being defined by our *enemies’* claim on us or rejection of us but being defined by *God’s* claim and embrace. It is about not being defined by the threat of death in any of its forms, but being defined by the gift of life in the promise of a love to which death is no barrier.

And, to acknowledge the usual objection here, loving our enemies is not about being voiceless doormats. It is not about refusing to challenge injustice and “alternative facts”. We are to resist all untruth precisely *because* we refuse to allow that the death with which others might threaten us has a stronger claim than the life that God gives. Love speaks the truth.

In the end, turning the other cheek and praying for our enemies is about knowing ourselves as children of the God who will, in the end, claim as children *all* people upon whom he sends sun and rain. Our confession is that in the end God will triumph, that all who hunger for righteousness and need for mercy will receive it.

We are not defined by the brokenness of a world which constantly turns hearts away from each other but by the triumph of the God in whom, whichever way we turn, we find ourselves facing him in his perfecting, reconciling love.

Let us then, seek ever to grow in love for all God’s children, reflecting the perfection of our heavenly Father.

Amen.
