

**SERMON – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity – Proper 3**  
Leviticus 19.1-2, 9-18 1 Corinthians 3.10-11,16-23 Matthew 5.38-48  
**ALL SAINTS CHURCH, WITLEY**  
**25 May 2008**

Our readings started this morning with Moses being told that his people must be holy, and ended with Jesus telling us to 'Be perfect - as your heavenly Father is perfect'

Well, we're on a loser already - how can we possibly do that. How can we be holy and perfect? And not just holy and perfect, but as holy and perfect as God is.

Moses was given the ten commandments and those were the basis for many, many more laws and restrictions all designed to make sure the people became holy or God-like. But as we know, the laws only made matters worse and served to divide the community into those who spent their lives learning and writing the law, judging all the others who were desperately trying to keep it. It certainly didn't make the people holy. Jesus came to be a living example of holiness, to show the people how to live their lives in God's way.

The old order was designed to stop people being so revengeful that they actually killed each other. The old law said 'an eye for an eye' and a tooth for a tooth' and when that law was introduced it prevented savage feuds. But Jesus had come to introduce the Kingdom of God, to model godly behaviour and to convince God's chosen race that they were the ones to model it to the rest of the world. They were not the chosen race to sit back and keep the rest of the world in darkness. They were the chosen race who will make God's Kingdom come on earth, as it is heaven. They were there to be holy and perfect. How could anyone be holy and perfect?

The secret as often happens lies in the translation.

The word for perfect in Greek, '*telios*' has a more functional meaning than the English word 'perfect' which is an abstract sort of word. The noun *telos* means something like 'fit for purpose'. For instance, they would say that at graduation a student reaches the state of being perfect, in other words 'arrived at the goal'. It doesn't mean that student knows everything and scored 100% it means that the student has now reached the point of qualifying in the subject that was being studied. So when we are bidden to be perfect, it means we have to become the people we were created to be – the person made in God's image who will be the best person possible – as intended. It is a challenge, but its attainable. Jesus is explaining how we can achieve that goal.

In this passage he is describing the way He lives, the example we have to follow. He is talking about personal relationships. Behave like Jesus and overflow with love that cares, love that has no malice, love that is not seeking for revenge and will not look on suffering as deserved or right. To help us in a practical way, Jesus said 'love you enemies' – that was a revolutionary thing to say. However can we do that and how could the Jews do that?

We have to remember that Jesus was talking to a society that had generations of enemies. The Jewish people were born as enemies of the Samaritans for a start. The received message was that they hated the Samaritans and had nothing to do with them. They also hated the invading Romans as they had hated so many nations before them that had overtaken their country. 'Enemies' were there all the time, there to be hated and certainly not to be loved.

First of all who are our enemies? Well, for us enemies includes all those people we don't like, all those who hurt us and all with whom we have some sort of conflict – it's a strong word with diverse meaning.

So when Jesus said 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' he is telling us how He behaves and therefore how we should behave. Looking at that sentence closely and using my very little knowledge of Greek I wondered which of the 4 words for love Jesus had used. I needed to know first of all what sort of love I had to have for my enemies. It was not the family, sexual or unconditional friendship kind of love - they each have separate words.

The word Jesus used was *agape*. The other three kinds of love are from the heart, they are almost instinctive, they happen whether we plan it or not. We are born loving our parents, we speak of 'falling in love' with a partner, we nurture friendship and become committed to our friends. But *agape* is a love

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that is worked at. It's something we want. It's will power over instinct. It's the power to love those we may not like and those who don't like us.

We cannot do that alone, we need help to overcome feelings of bitterness, revenge, anger and mistrust. We need to turn our thoughts from wanting harm to befall a person to wanting the best for them. Jesus showed us very powerfully what he meant by loving his enemies. He didn't harm those who arrested and tried him.

He went even further and prayed for them. It's a tall order, it's against our basic human instinct and its not easy. But Jesus tells us that we have to do it. The three examples Jesus chose are interesting because they reflect a custom and mode of behaviour which we don't immediately understand.

To be struck on the right cheek meant to be hit with the back of the right hand. That was not only painful, it was an insult as slaves, children or women – in other words an inferior would be struck on the right cheek. To hit back perpetuates the insult and causes further sin. To offer the other cheek, implies, OK hit me again but this time as an equal. A restoration of relationship.

The next statement about if someone takes the shirt off your back, offer him your cloak, is also a subtle way of putting a relationship right. In that society, a person would have only worn a shirt and cloak and to remove both would have caused nakedness and made the person look very poor, a much bigger insult than was intended. By offering a cloak as well it is challenging the attacker to see what is really happening.

The third scenario of going the extra mile – a phrase that is in our everyday language – originates in the law that Roman soldiers could compel civilians to carry their kit for a mile, but only for a mile. Offering to carry it for two miles makes the soldier question what he's doing. It would make the soldier vulnerable because he would be in real trouble if it was discovered that he had allowed his kit to be carried by someone else for 2 miles.

So by turning the tables and offering to do more than is demanded the victim ceases to be victimised and defuses the whole argument. That's what's meant by loving our enemies, helping them to improve their ways without compromising ourselves by entering into their bad behaviour. When Jesus was mocked he didn't respond. When he was trapped by clever questioning, he rose above it and when he was hit, he didn't hit back.

All this is a wonderful theory and Jesus is the perfect example, but we are human, how can we possibly follow these guidelines. We all need our own strategies to learn to love those whom we find difficult for whatever reason – our enemies. One thing I am sure about – Jesus did not expect us to become doormats, or to put up with being bullied. He didn't expect us to accept bad behaviour without comment. He asks us to challenge and improve bad behaviour, he expects us not to retaliate and make the situation worse. So often our human instinct is to repay like for like, to wait for the first opportunity to 'get our own back'. We talk about people behind their backs and turn other people against them.

Jesus had a lot of aggro from the Pharisees, lawyers and teachers. They didn't understand that He was trying to free them from the confines of their strict laws so they could be free to love one another. But Jesus didn't accept their taunts and jibes without comment, He was very forthright and called them hypocrites.

At one point He even accused them of being white washed tomb stones – clean on the outside and rotten inside. He didn't mince his words. But Jesus didn't seek to have them executed or even deposed from their positions. He was seeking to help them to realise their full potential, to become more God-like, more holy, more perfect.

To become more holy, we have to recognise those people we find difficult, those we are at odds with and those who have hurt us and then work out how we can love them. That's what Jesus meant and that's what He wants us to do.

Amen