

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
February 20th 2022

This Gospel passage follows straight on from the end of last week's. This is a bit confused by the words of context put at the beginning of today's reading, but in fact it reads:

Alas for you who are rich;
Alas for you who have your fill;
Alas for you when the world speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets. I say this to you, love your enemies....

He tells his disciples, don't tell people what they want to hear so that they praise you; you will experience opposition if you stick to the truth and your response to that opposition should be love. The whole thing needs to be read together: Blesseds, alas-es, and loving enemies. It is all part of the same thing.

Now here is the thing about the Lord's command to love our enemies. It is really easy to do, and we might even feel a bit smug about how easy it is, so long as we don't actually have any obvious enemies. When Jesus said this, he knew that there were people who actually wanted to destroy him. I am guessing that this simply doesn't apply to us. We are very happy to sign up to 'love your enemies' so long as we don't actually have any.

We have probably become rather used to this command, but it would be good to stop for a moment and review just how radical this is. Everything within our human nature says: 'strike first'. Everything screams at us, if someone is out to get you, you need to get them first. And that was very much the culture of the ancient world. Power was everything. The Way of Christ is radical, different and challenging because it turns this on its head. There is no room for the pre-emptive strike designed to disable the opposition before they can hurt you. Jesus takes a completely different approach. It is not a way of weakness, that just gives in to oppressors. He does not just roll over and let them get away with anything. He is very clear about speaking the truth, however uncomfortable that may be. He will call out evil as evil; but he will still love the person.

The radical way of Jesus Christ says 'There is already more than enough hate in the world, lets not add any more; there is already more than enough evil in the world, lets not add any more. Instead, lets try and counterbalance all that hate with some love, and all that evil with some good.'

Loving the people who love you is just a swop. It is good to love the people who love you, of course, but it is not costly. But the people who hate you, well it makes us ask 'where does all this hate come from?' And we have to acknowledge that sometimes the people who hate us, the people who are our enemies, may have a point; they may just be responding to our own failures, our own weaknesses, the ways in which we have hurt them in the past. If

someone hates me, or wants to hurt me, it may be very difficult to turn that around. But one thing is certain, we will not stop someone from hating us by hating them more; we will not stop someone wanting to hurt us by making sure we hurt them first. So, in today's challenging Gospel passage, Jesus invites us to break the cycle of violence and anger. In a few weeks we will read again the story of his trial and see how, very calmly, he declines to hate and rail at his accusers, but calmly drives them to see the choices they must make, the choices between love and hate, between building and destroying, between hearts that are soft but vulnerable and hearts that are hard enough to break another person's heart.

It is very easy to love your enemies when you don't have any. But it isn't just the people who want to destroy us that Jesus has in mind here. What about the person who is competing with us for a job, a person who might not be above dropping the odd bit of gossip into the system to undermine us? Or the person who seems to oppose everything that we try and do just because it is us that tries to do it? Or the person whose manner, their way of speaking and of acting just rubs us up the wrong way every time? What about the people who may not be our personal enemies, but who hate our culture and our civilisation, or who hate the Church? Can we love these people? Can we, instead of lashing out to destroy them before they harm us, begin by understanding them a little better? God loves them, so who am I to judge them more harshly than he does?

I know that there are some people who hate the Church because they know that what it tells us about real, authentic human living is challenging and disturbing and they don't want to be challenged or disturbed, so they fight it. I understand that, and I will try and love them through it. But I also know that there are people who hate the Church because once they loved it and it has let them down, or disappointed them, or even hurt them, and I will try and love them through that too. I also know that while there are some people who may just not like the Gospel I try to proclaim, there will be others who find me difficult because I have misunderstood them or hurt them or disappointed them, and that is sad but it is just human life. We get things wrong. What Jesus is saying is, in your relationships with other people don't always start with how you feel, how it affects you, how it impacts on you. Start with understanding the other person, and trying to see what it is within them that God already loves. Then there might be some hope of a future where there is more love, and less hate, and that will be a world a little bit more like Heaven.

So, to recap:

It is easy to say we love our enemies when we don't actually have any;

Responding to hate with love breaks a timeless cycle of violence and evil;

Loving your enemies does not mean giving way to evil;

Some of the people who dislike us have reasons for doing so, reasons that we need to own and understand;

God loves our enemies exactly the same amount as he loves us; we still may not like them very much, but we do at least need to treat them as well as God does.