

## **Sermon for 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2025, Year C, Epiphany 7**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**Luke 6:27-38**

### **Sermon**

One of the commentaries I read on today's gospel suggests that most congregations will respond to Jesus's message the way children often respond to seeing cooked spinach on their plate at dinner – and not just children! No matter how much the preacher tries to explain the nutritional value of the meal, no one really wants to dig in!

Doesn't this feel like the most difficult Christian teaching of all? "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also."

No one wants to do this. It goes entirely against our instinctive sense of justice, and we are no different today from people two thousand years ago. We want punishment to fit the crime, we don't want people to get away with murder through easy forgiveness, and asking us to do good to those who hate us sounds like submitting to an abusive relationship.

Surely, if we turn our cheek to an abuser, we only enable them to continue abusing. If we give free gifts to those who steal from us, do we not encourage more people to steal, since the consequences are so positive for them?

These sayings of Jesus appear to be a recipe for Christians to be doormats, and an unconditional welcome for abusers and sociopaths of every kind. It feels like utterly terrible advice unless you want to advertise yourself as someone who longs to be taken advantage of.

But I really don't think Jesus is addressing victims and telling them that they should double-down on submitting to their abusers. I think Jesus is speaking from a completely different worldview in which Christians already have all the riches of the kingdom of God, and our acts of kindness are not a grovelling weakness in the face of cruelty and evil, but a heroic resistance that says we will not allow the world to force or tempt us into its selfish mould, but we will continue to insist on acting as God's beloved and loving children, come what may.

Jesus calls on us, his followers, to love our enemies and pray for those who hate us, not because we are weak and have no stronger alternative, or because it might make bad people feel guilty and change – that is unlikely – but because this is who we are. It should be at the core of our character to refuse to see others as enemies, and instead to see everyone through the lens of unconditional love.

This isn't a technique or tactic to somehow rise above conflict and change others by showing kindness through gritted teeth; it's simply the way a Christlike person would see the world. Someone who belongs to God's kingdom, who knows without a doubt that they are known and loved by God, can 'afford' to give everything even to those who will never reciprocate. Such saints don't even consider how the recipient of their love will respond, they just love, because that's who they are. They give, not from the position of someone who is weak and oppressed, but as an heir to a kingdom. They may have little worldly wealth and power, but they have everything God's community of love has to offer: 'a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.'

The world will say that we should not squander the little we have on those who will not appreciate it. Vice-president J.D.Vance recently insisted that we really only have an obligation to love our family, and support for everyone else should be restricted to whatever crumbs are left over. The 'order of love' he called it, insisting that it was good Christian common sense. But that's a worldview that presupposes there's only so much love to go round, and if you include too many

people it grows thin and weak and insipid. From this perspective, Jesus's commands to love our enemies just become onerous and idealistic ethical demands that no one can ever hope to live up to. But when Jesus's disciples realise that they are heirs to God's superabundant love, forgiveness, grace and mercy, then turning the other cheek becomes a natural, transformational act of resistance to evil that can change the world, and did, and still does. It all depends on your perspective.

The irony of our gospel text is that despite Jesus imploring his followers to give freely without expecting anything in return – something that ran entirely counter to the usual social contract of exchanging gifts and obligations – he then goes on to say that those who give freely in this world will have a great reward in God's kingdom. This has the rather unfortunate side-effect of making it seem like we are only being a people of generosity and love because of what we get out of it. A critic might suggest that, like Satan accusing Job, we only really love God because of the gifts we receive in return. This seems to strip away God's grace, turning God's love into just another transaction: 'obey my rules and you'll get the heavenly reward.' But the truth is that despite our constant failure to love our enemies, God loves us anyway.

So I must conclude that Jesus is telling us about this great reward, not to try to give us a selfish motivation to do good, but as a reminder that God's blessings, gifts and grace far outweigh anything that we could expect from a normal social exchange of gifts. God loves us, not because of what we have given to him or done for him, but because of who God is. And God's greatest gift is to love us so thoroughly and generously that we can't help but follow the same path: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."

Jesus's 'good news' is not always 'easy news' for his followers. Who can truly love their enemies and do good to those who hate them, without hoping for

anything in return? The hard truth is that love is not something we can summon up on demand, and even rigorous practice at doing good works will not really change our hearts by itself. What changes us and allows us to love is experiencing a forgiving grace from God that far surpasses our sins, our selfishness, our best intentions, and all our hard work.

None of us can do this in our own strength, but perhaps this is Jesus's point. He gives us the impossible challenge to love our enemies, knowing that we will never be able to do it until we realise that we ourselves were once an 'enemy' whom God has utterly loved and forgiven, and welcomed as an heir of God's beautiful kingdom.