

**10<sup>th</sup> July 2016**

**Tab Sunday School Anniversary**

**Matthew 5. 38-42**

On our Sunday School Anniversary we give thanks for the centuries of Christian education and nurture given through this place. For the Christian faith to continue it needs people to pass it on. It needs people to enthusiastically communicate it and live it so that others are drawn to the faith and make it their own. We are all engaged in the business of encouraging each other to follow Jesus.

Today we give thanks for the teachings and life of Jesus and what a difference he makes to us.

Of course religious education is controversial today. It's a popular argument that religion causes violence and it's a contemporary concern about religiously inspired violence. Facts do speak for themselves and certain types of religious belief do seem to lead to violence. There is bad religion out there. But I'd say it was a huge over generalisation to say that all religion leads to violence. The answer to bad religion is not no religion but good religion. Faith that isn't arrogant and dogmatic but open to encounter and mystery and wonder at the world we live in and seeks to serve humanity and care for the planet.

You don't need religion to cause violence. The millions who died in the two world wars didn't die because of

religion. The atheist Joseph Stalin killed more of his own people, 20 million, than died thanks to Hitler who likewise wasn't religious. You don't need religion as an excuse for violence

Jesus never had an army and never resorted to violence. He got angry, on behalf of others, but never retaliated.

We have been studying some of his teaching and life by looking at Matthew's gospel. From the Sermon on the Mount comes one of his most controversial sayings that has often been misunderstood.

You have heard it said 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But what I tell you is this: do not resist those who wrong you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer them the other also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your cloak as well. If someone in authority presses you into service for one mile, go with him two. Give to anyone who asks and do not turn your back on anyone who wants to borrow.'

King James's scholars decided to translate the Greek word *antistenai* as 'resist not'. The king didn't want his subjects objecting to his unjust policies. Submission is the will of God. And most modern translations have meekly followed in that path.

Walter Wink, Professor of Biblical interpretation in New York seminary, whose work I'm drawing on suggests that a proper translation would have been don't strike back at evil in kind. Don't retaliate against violence with violence. Jesus was no less committed to opposing evil

than the anti-Roman resistance fighters. The only difference was over the means used. How one should fight evil;

There are three general responses to evil. Fight – violent opposition, flight – passivity and submission – and the third way advocated by Jesus – non-violence that seeks to love the enemy into change. And Jesus gives three examples of making a stand in a non-violent way.

We've just dealt with turning the other cheek – understanding it not to mean take the insult, be a doormat but being an act of resistance- not being dismissed as an inferior- forcing your oppressor to acknowledge your humanity.

It is important to remember who Jesus' audience is. His listeners were not those who use force or who impose forced labour or initiate lawsuits but those who are their victims: if anyone hits you ...if anyone sues you... if anyone forces you to go one mile. The people Jesus was talking to were the ones who were subjected to these indignities, forced to stifle their inner outrage at their dehumanizing treatment.

Let's look at this second example. Someone is being sued for their shirt – their inner garment. Only the poorest of the poor would have nothing but an outer garment or cloak to give as collateral for a loan. Jewish law of Jesus' day strictly required its return every evening at sunset, for that was all the poor had in which to sleep. The situation to which Jesus alludes is one with which all his hearers would have been all too familiar:

the poor debtor has sunk ever deeper into poverty, the debt cannot be repaid, and his creditor has hauled him into court to try to seize his property by legal means. Indebtedness was a serious social problem in first century Palestine, as much as it is today. Jesus parables are full of debtors struggling to salvage their lives. The situation was not always a natural calamity that had overtaken the incompetent. It was the direct consequence of Roman imperial policy. Emperors taxed the wealthy ruthlessly to fund their wars. The wealthy then hit the peasants hard. Roman policy allowed exploitation to take place. It is in this context that Jesus speaks. His hearers share a hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands and goods and finally even the cloak they wear.

Why then does Jesus counsel them to give over their cloak as well as their shirt? This would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of court stark naked! Put yourself in the debtor's place and imagine the chuckles. There stands the creditor – lobster red with embarrassment, your outer garment in one hand, your under wear in another. You have suddenly turned tables on him. You had no hope of winning the trial; the law was entirely in his favour. But you have refused to be humiliated, and at the same time you have registered a stunning protest against a system that encourages debt. You've said in effect, 'you want my robe? Here, take everything! Now you've got all I have except my body. Is that what you'll take next?

Nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell not on the naked party, but on the person viewing or causing

one's nakedness. As you parade through the streets your friends and neighbours startled, aghast, inquire what has happened. They join the procession which now resembles a victory parade. The creditor is embarrassed and shamed. They are revealed not to be a respectable moneylender but a party in the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. This unmasking is not simply to shame the creditor but to offer perhaps the first chance in his life to see what harm his practices can cause and to repent. Far from collaborating in injustice, the poor man has used the law to make an exploitative law a laughing stock.

Jesus is in effect sponsoring clowning. Lampooning and ridiculing what is unjust.

There was a story about the apartheid regime in South Africa where the authorities had sought for a long time to destroy a particular shantytown. One day after most of the men and women had left for work the army arrived. They announced that the few women there had five minutes to gather their things and then bulldozers would commence work. The women, perhaps sensing the prudery of the farm boys who largely made up the army, stood in front of the bulldozers and stripped off all their clothes. The army fled.

Jesus third example, the one about going the second mile, is drawn from the very enlightened practice of limiting the amount of forced labour that Roman soldiers could levy on subject peoples. Mile markers were often placed by the roadside. A soldier under Roman law could impress a civilian to carry his pack one mile only; to force the civilian to go further carried

with it severe penalties under military law. In this way Rome attempted to limit the anger of the occupied people and still keep its armies on the move. Nevertheless this levy was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a subject people even in the Promised Land.

To this proud but subjugated people Jesus does not counsel revolt. One does not befriend the soldier draw him aside and then knife him in the ribs. Jesus was aware of the futility of such armed revolt. But why walk the second mile? Isn't this aiding and abetting the enemy?

The question here is once again how can the oppressed recover the initiative, how can they assert their human dignity in a situation that cannot for the time being be changed. The rules are Caesar's, but not how one responds to the rules – that is God's and Caesar has no power over that.

Imagine then the soldier's surprise when at the next mile marker he reluctantly reaches to assume his pack and you say 'oh no, let me carry it another mile' why would you do that? What are you up to? Normally he has to coerce your kinsmen to carry his pack, and now you do it cheerfully and will not stop! Is this a provocation? Are you insulting his strength? Being kind? Trying to get him disciplined for seeming to make you go farther than you should? Are you planning to file a complaint? Create trouble?

From a situation of servitude, you have once more seized the initiative. You have taken back the power of

choice. The soldier is thrown off balance by being deprived of the predictability of your response. He has never dealt with such a problem before. If he's felt superior to the vanquished he won't enjoy it today. Imagine the hilarious situation of a roman infantryman pleading with a Jew 'aw come on, please give me back my pack!'

In both situations Jesus is trying to help those who are engaged in oppressive acts to repent by being made embarrassed and uncomfortable by their actions. There is always the danger of using such tactics for revenge and humiliation. Or the uncompromising love of Jesus being sentimentalised and just seen as being nice to someone. This was loving confrontation that sought to free the oppressed from passivity and submission and the oppressor from sin.

Jesus way was to assert your own humanity and dignity as a person. Meet force with ridicule or humour. Break the cycle of humiliation. Refuse to submit or accept the inferior position. Expose the injustice and shame the oppressor.

Walter Wink gives some practical examples. A mother in one of his workshops told a story that deals with the perennial problem of bullying. Her son was the smallest in the class and he was afflicted with chronic sinusitis. On the school bus there was a bully who was terrorizing all the kids. Finally, one day the boy had had it with the bully. He blew his nose into his right hand, and then walked toward the bully, extending his hand and saying 'I've always wanted to shake the hand of a bully'. The

bully began to back up to the back of the bus, where he meekly sat down and never bothered anyone on that bus again, because that nose was always at the ready. The boy used his weakness as his strength. He took the momentum of evil and used it to throw his opponent.

The nurses in a hospital in the States were tired of being browbeaten and corrected in front of patients and generally made to feel inferior and worthless by some of the doctors on the staff. The nurses put their heads together and came up with a plan. They went to a sympathetic administrator who set up a pink alert which would be transmitted over the intercom the next time a doctor started abusing a nurse. From all over the hospital nurses who were free converged on the scene surrounded the doctor holding hands waiting for the doctor to make the first move. Finally the doctor would acquiesce in their lesson.

Many a woman has been counselled, on the strength of this passage to 'turn the other cheek' – the Christian thing is to put up with the violence or the humiliation of an abusive partner. What she needs in the spirit of Jesus' words is to find a way to restore her own dignity and end the vicious circle of humiliation, guilt and bruising. She needs to assert some control in the situation and force her partner to regard her as an equal, or get out of the relationship altogether. The victim needs to recover herself worth and seize the initiative from her oppressor. And he needs to be helped to overcome his violence and abuse. The most loving thing she could might be to have him arrested.

These examples are only little sketches, like the cartoons that Jesus gave – to give us the idea. Whatever situation we're in – abusive partners, bullying bosses, and humiliation in the workplace or in a social environment – we need to think it through ourselves. What would it mean to reflect God's generous love despite the pressure and provocation, despite your own anger and frustration? To love even your enemies – the topic that I shall tackle next week.

Impossible? Well maybe at one level. But again Jesus' teaching isn't just good advice, its good news. Jesus did it all himself and opened up the new way of being human so that all who follow him can discover it. When they mocked him, he didn't respond. When they challenged him he told quizzical stories making them to think differently. When they struck him he didn't strike back. When they nailed him to a cross he prayed for them. Christ asks nothing from his followers that he hasn't already faced himself. And within his life to discover the love of God that the world needs to know so badly.