Sermon 17th March 2019

Luke 6 v 27

“But I tell you who hear me, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill treat you”

This is our second service in lent when we continue to focus and reflect on what it means to walk the way of Jesus, especially in the context of our new Mission statement

“Inspired by Jesus, walking his way of radical love to make a difference in the world”

And our particular theme for this week is what it means to love our enemies. This is perhaps **the** commandment of Jesus that has caused so much discussion and debate in the Christian church. How can we who are so frail, faulty and weak possibly love our enemies – when we find it so hard to truly act in love always to those we like as friends or even love as our nearest and dearest.

I was a teenager in the 60’s when make love, not war was the mantra of many of my generation. It was the height of CND ban the bomb, I remember the odd march I went on, a time of free thinking, flower power was at its height, and mini-skirts and PVC macs – do you remember – and rocking to the rolling stones and the Beatles! And it was also the decade of the assassination of John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King – and of course the first man on the moon. It was a time of liberalism – a breaking away from post war England. There was the freedom to challenge and a movement to more liberal theology, a reaction away from “though shalt not” thinking and behaving.

My other major influence as a teenager was that I was brought up in a pacifist home. My father had been a conscientious objector during the war and worked with the blood transfusion unit on the war front. Much to the disappointment of his mother, after a promising first degree in French before the war and an expectation to go into teaching, changed his direction and candidated and trained for the Methodist ministry after the war.

I was brought up in church life but only attended my school’s Christian Union once or twice as I was so disturbed by my perception that their theology was narrowing and limiting the love of God and the power of forgiveness.

So my life has been shaped by those early influences of liberal theology, pacifism and free thinking. And so in the 70’s that took me to a red brick university to study sociology and join the mass of long skirted long haired students at that time! But what grounded me was a wonderful collection of young Christians in the Methsoc at Newcastle university and the start of much teaching about the generosity of God’s love reaching beyond the conventional view of friend and enemy.

It’s some time since our country has gone through a dramatic week politically first on Tuesday evening with the alleged new deal being devastatingly defeated for our prime minister and government, then a vote on Wednesday to rule out a no deal, and then on Thursday the vote for an extension to the timescale.

(space for any additional update!)

What a display of rivalry, split leadership and inability to compromise. Rather than bringing people together it has torn them apart, brought uncertainty and lack of confidence to the country.

We are in danger of forgetting why the precursor to the European Union came about in the early fifties. It came about to bring unity, to bring people and economies together in the aftermath of the second world war. Its vision was to ensure the major five countries of Europe worked together for harmony and wellbeing.

Today’s passage asks the question for us who is our enemy? How can we love them?

In his compelling book “Jesus and Non Violence” Walter Wink develops his thinking about a third way – a helpful way of thinking for our mission journey “walking his way of radical love”. He sees non-violent pacifism not as an act of passivity or submission. Love of enemies has been twisted by some to make the oppressed compliant and turning the cheek to every wrong as a passive act. Non-violence is thought of as an absence of conflict. Oppose the system but don’t get involved in changing it, hence passivity equals pacifism. The opposite of this is revolt, militancy and violence. Nothing else can challenge the behaviour of our enemies.

Walter Wink describes a third alternative way. This way is different. It seizes the moral initiative, it strives to find a creative alternative to violence. It means asserting your own humanity and dignity as a person (away with compliance); it suggests meeting force with ridicule or humour, it strives to break the cycle of humiliation. By refusing to submit we don’t accept the inferior position, we expose the injustice of the system and take control of the power dynamic. It can shame the oppressor into repentance and forces the powers that be to make decisions for which they are not prepared. In that way we can stand our ground and find our own power. It causes the oppressor to see us in a new light and deprives the oppressor of a situation where force is effective. But there is a cost in this third way; we must be willing to suffer rather than retaliate and maybe face the penalty of unjust laws.

We live in a world where revenge is the order of the day-

A Palestinian terrorist blows himself up in an Israeli market square so Israelis launch rocket missiles in a neighbourhood in the West Bank. ISIS militants behead a prisoner, so bombs are dropped on the militant’s camps – innocent women and children are killed. And so a tragic cycle of never ending violence escalates and causes further bloodshed. In our context we call it “war on terrorism” but isn’t it revenge pure and simple?

Should we also question the government’s approach to Shamima Begum whose British nationality was taken from her as she gave birth to her third child Jarrah in a refugee camp. Remember she was a child when she was radicalised in Britain and went to join ISIS in Syria. Does the loss of her third child in no doubt poor conditions, without clean water and sterile conditions, bring into question how that decision was made. Where for her is the place for compassion, for care, giving her the chance to be reconciled with her loving family and others the chance to understand how she came to be radicalised? It escaped much of the news this week but her mothers’ solicitor wrote this week to the government asking for compassion and that her British nationality be reinstated. Is her young life’s pattern now set into a life of radical militancy against our state. Is she really our enemy?

Jesus calls us to break that cycle by taking a road, a way that does not seek revenge. Someone has to take the first step and model a behaviour that sets the stage for peace and harmony.

But of course we are not personally fighting terrorists; we’re not fighting for freedom. So how does this apply to us?

One example has been publicised this week about Sir Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, some thirty years ago. He has been speaking this week about the way it has become a vehicle for spreading hatred and misinformation, as evidenced in the Russian hacking in the last presidential election in the States in 2016. He has stated that the web is at a critical point in need of a radical turn around in order to avoid it becoming a destroyer of worlds. In 2009 fearing this he set up the World Wide Web Foundation to protect the human rights landscape. He does believe there is hope for change with more regulation being introduced but warns that this must increase and be more widespread especially in the huge multinationals. This is the kind of turn around behaviour that is needed.

In one of his sermons Martin Luther King tells of an occasion when he and his brother were driving between Atlanta and Tennessee at night. For some reason the drivers that night were driving with full beam on their lights and not dimming them as other drivers were approaching. I’m sure we’ve all got really irritated when that happens and even blinded by their lack of consideration. It got so bad that Martin’s brother said I can’t stand this any longer. The next time this happens I am going to keep my lights on full beam and I’m going to flash them with all their power. Martin rebuked him and said “No, don’t do that, there’d be too much light on the highway and it will end up in mutual destruction. Somebody’s got to have some sense and dim their lights.”

And that’s one of the problems of our age and of history in the face of violence that civilisations have refused to dim the lights. Martin Luther King said” If we don’t have sense enough to turn on the beautiful and powerful lights of love in this world, our civilisation will be plunged into the abyss of destruction”.

We see daily how force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. It is a descending spiral ultimately ending in destruction. We must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and we do that by love.

We’re familiar with this kind of generous love – known as agape – not an amorous love but one that supersedes emotion and feeling. The command of Jesus is to love one another and that includes our enemies. Doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, and praying for those who mistreat you is the only changce of breaking up the cycle of worldly, community and family conflict. We are called to reflect Gods love in the world and to break the cycle.

In our passage today those instructions of loving, doing good, turning the other cheek, allowing your coat to be taken, giving and lending without expecting a return – convey a deep absurd overwhelming generosity, that comes from the heart.

This lavish generosity is our new way – it has a fresh, energetic, proactive quality. It is not passive, waiting for things to happen. It is new life bursting out, spring like, with flowers bursting through concrete , it is so powerful. It startles everyone with it colour, passion and vigour. It’s a deep attitude of heart emboldened by the power of the spirit, ready to face all that the world can throw at you.

Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it says Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage. Think of what you’d really like someone to do for you, and do it for them. Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead.

If everyone in the world lived in this way there would not be violence or revenge or division – no importance attributed to property or possession.

Our way is following the Jesus who came to us because God loved us so much; such an overwhelming, generous abundant love. We follow Jesus who on his way to the cross was struck not only on his cheek but all over his body, we follow Jesus whose coat was not just taken, but was ripped off his back and torn into pieces at the foot of his cross. Who even on the cross said Father I forgive them for they know not what they do. He showed love not only to his friends and followers but even to his enemies who said “Crucify crucify”. He wept for the city that rejected him and turned away from the Messiah whom they had welcomed into the city on Palm Sunday.

It’s a simple clear instruction in these few verses about loving our enemies but seldom of us follow it. What a world we would love in if we did. We would have a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Let us follow this third way, this way of love,

It is indeed this radical love that we are called to so that we can make a difference.

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