



Third Sunday before Lent
20 February 2011

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

Readings: 1 Corinthians 3.10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5.38-48

It is so easy to enter a room, weigh up what's happening and get it completely wrong! You arrive at a friend's house for supper and judge the couple who invited you look ready for the divorce courts, their kids don't want to see you, and you have come the wrong time for dinner! In fact all that's happening is that the cat which you gave them has gone missing for the 100th time in one week, one of the kids left the door open, and the dinner got burnt as they looked for it. Story told, all is forgiven, and all that's wrong is a hunger pang and the missing cat!

It's a bit like that being given passages in the Bible like today's Gospel reading. Read on their own Jesus' words sound impossible to manage! You are to allow yourself to be beaten, - turn the other cheek when someone strikes you - robbed – don't just give away your tunic give your whole cloak too - and worn out – go that extra mile why don't you? - by those around you. You are to attain perfection, to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect!

These words don't seem at first hearing a useful basis for personal or social ethics. They have been used to permit physical abuse to be continued against the victim, to keep servants and children obedient to violent masters and mistresses, and to encourage the martyrdom of exhaustion. In a word they don't seem very healthy – something's missing here.

What's missing is the context of Jesus' words towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount in St Matthew's Gospel. We need to anchor these words firmly in that context. When we do that we realise that Jesus is speaking of an end time when the Day of God's Kingdom has fully dawned! No wonder we cannot fully live out these words, waiting as we are for God's kingdom to break for the last time upon us. In St Matthew's Gospel the sermon follows an in-breaking of the Kingdom in Jesus himself. It has been confirmed in a voice from heaven that Jesus is God's beloved Son. Jesus has announced the coming of God's kingly reign. He has gathered a community of followers around him and has begun to display the signs of God's breaking into human time by performing miracles of healing. In other words the context of these words is Jesus' announcement of a new era in God's relations with us, an era which will involve a complete reversal of our usual human values. Jesus is acting as a poet who wants to prod our imagination into envisioning a whole new starting point in human relations – a starting point in which like Christ upon the cross we sometimes and in some places accept utter powerlessness as God does for our sake in Christ.

These unnatural responses – turning the cheek for another blow, handing over our warm clothing, walking still further when it's demanded of us – get under our skin and force us to contemplate something other than business as usual in a world where our business and social life revolve around measured generosity, reciprocated kindness and fulfilled goals. They stab us into reflection upon a God whose utter dedication to us seems strange and whose only Son will walk out into a place of shame and torture to show us where our punitive attitudes and ways of organizing things end up.

Jesus shows us a different way of behaving.

What is this different way?

It is a way in which we have set before us the glorious simplicity of God's call, to do justly, to love mercy and walk humbly with our God, even while we struggle with engagement, real engagement in the world. That engagement involves compromising these high ideals sometimes in the name of justice itself.

What I mean is perhaps best illustrated by telling you a story, a story which some of you know well but others of you, perhaps new to St Martin's or to the Christian church may need to learn more about. It's the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His life and work show us pre-eminently how it is not always right in God's name to turn the other cheek. But the wrongness of turning the other cheek at one moment does not prevent us straining every gut to be kind at another moment and in another place. God forgives our compromises necessary to living justly and lovingly in a fallen world, while leading us out into greater ever wider fields of forgiveness.

Bonhoeffer was a promising theologian and influential pastor in Berlin when the Second World War broke out. He came from a very well connected family, was engaged to be married, and had a successful career before him. In the world's terms and by the world's standards he had everything to live for. But already before the war began he with his family had stood out against Hitler's National Socialism and its attitudes towards the Jews. German Protestantism at that time was hailing Hitler as Germany's saviour – but Bonhoeffer had become a leader in the Confessing Church which took the opposite view. Bonhoeffer's engagement in his country's plight showed itself first in his refusal to stay safely in New York where worried friends had found him a lectureship where he could have retreated safely until the end of the war. Returning instead at the commencement of the war to Germany Bonhoeffer became in effect a double agent, joining the Abwehr, the military intelligence and travelling on a Nazi passport while secretly plotting to overthrow the government and have Hitler tried for war crimes. During this time he worked with our own Bishop George Bell of Chichester who tried to get the British Government to support a possible coup against Hitler, but to no avail. The plot for the coup failed through lack of such support a plan was raised instead in desperation by Bonhoeffer and his friends instead to assassinate Hitler. Here there were circumstances in which it was quite obviously not right to turn the other cheek or walk the extra mile. Better to throw oneself onto God's forgiveness and become like Jesus a condemned criminal for the sake of the Kingdom. But the murder plot failed too, and Bonhoeffer was thrown into prison. Two years later he was executed on April 9th 1945 within days of liberation by American troops.

Writings – letters, poems, prayers, theology, ethics poured out of Bonhoeffer while he was in prison. But illustrating our theme of living fully engaged in the affairs of the world while acting also in the transforming power of God's light, it is just as important to learn from Bonhoeffer's behaviour during that gruelling time. He did not flinch from taking up the responsibility to act against a man, Adolph Hitler, who was destroying all that was worthwhile about human life and Godly values, but at the same time he put those godly values into action in prison where he was known for his great courage and calm, his kindness and cheerfulness, his forgiveness and love towards prisoners and guards. In desperate personal fear of death himself he lived in the world in courage, in lonely tears over the loss of family and friends, he yet lived in love towards others. In awareness that he was prepared to murder for the sake of a greater good, and to bear the ignominy of being thought a traitor and a murderer, he yet heard the Kingdom's music playing sufficiently within his soul to cast himself utterly into God's hands in trust.

To illustrate trying to live in the light of this morning's Gospel I want to end with these words from Bonhoeffer's poem

Night Voices

Here Bonhoeffer laments his people's sinfulness, engages in change, understands himself to have compromised yet counts on God's Kingdom values, forgiveness, understanding and love.

We learnt to call lies just,
Uniting ourselves with the unjust.
When violence was done to the weak
Our cold eyes did not speak.
Sacred bonds by which we once were bound
Are now torn and fallen to the ground.
Friendship and truth betrayed
Tears and remorse in ridicule displayed

Though robbed of freedom and honour
We stand tall before men with pride
And when we are wrongly decried
Before men we declare our innocence freely

Only before thee, maker of all,
Before thee alone are we sinners.

We will prepare ourselves in quietness
Until you call us to new times

Thanks be to God for the context of the Gospel, for Jesus, God's kingdom breaking in among us.

Amen.