

Sermon 20th February 2022
Year C Seventh After Epiphany
Written by Rev'd Selina McMahon, Delivered by Rev'd Dr Gemma Dashwood

People can be very selective in what they expect from a sermon. It's almost as if ideas have been formed in advance. Expectations are raised, and, if the preacher doesn't live up to their unwritten brief, they are in trouble. Can I make my excuses now and say that this sermon was prepared by Sel, so these are her thoughts, not mine, in case you want to take her to task on them later.

Nevertheless it is true that, to many people, if you were to preach of a God who is judgemental, vengeful and angry, not many people will object. That's almost what is expected of a God who sets plans in motion by giving people a hard time to punish others at some future date. We only have to look at the story of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph's intense suffering and eventual redemption all so that the entire tribe of Israel would at some future date be saved from a famine, and you can see the sort of God many people believe is at the heart of our faith.

However, if you start preaching about a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind, ...and you are in trouble. It's not the message some people want. They would rather hear about division between different groups of people in the church rather than a God who is accepting to all, whatever their nationality, gender, sexuality, social standing etc.

Jesus preached on a great number of subjects, from parables designed to instruct his disciples, to all-out attacks on those who opposed the path he was taking. Certainly, the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees saw the blunt end of his tongue on occasion, but then, so did St. Peter when he was admonished with Jesus' famous, "get thee behind me Satan" speech. Probably the most contentious of our Lord's sayings – the one about which more people argue than any other – is that we are to love our enemies. And yet, on the face of it, it sounds so simple – and is another example of the subversive nature of Jesus. Throughout his entire life Jesus persisted in doing the sort of things that would really get up people's noses. Some say most clergy do that too, but that's not a bad thing if it forces you to see something from another person's perspective or consider a new slant on something that you already thought of as cut and dry before. So it was that Jesus would heal lepers who were shunned by society; he would have his meal with the tax collectors and prostitutes who were similarly dismissed by the religious hierarchy of the day; and he would stress the importance of a small child in a society that considered children and women to be little more than chattel. The very notion that you should do anything except revile your enemy, and seek revenge was the very antithesis of their understanding. Even God, they reasoned, had fought on their side to help them vanquish their enemies.

And here's this upstart from Nazareth telling everyone to love those self-same enemies. Who does he think he is?

It's a well understood idea that English is a very lazy language. We have one word for three types of love whereas Greek – the language of the New Testament – has separate words for these different forms of love. Here, it is the one that is most difficult to understand and translate, but effectively describes an act of benevolence towards someone. It means that no matter what that person does to us, we must never allow ourselves to desire anything but the highest good for them. No matter what they do we would not wish harm on them. More importantly, we will deliberately go out of our way to do good to that person and be kind to them. We can't love them like our nearest and dearest, our families and our friends, but we can see to it that, no matter what they do to us, we will seek nothing but that they flourish.

There is a big difference between this type of love and the love for our families because we cannot help but love them. It's just something that happens to us. Our language reflects it – we speak of falling in love. But to love your enemies in such a way to do nothing bad to them but only good is not only something of the heart – it is something of the will. And it's only through the grace of Christ that we can do this.

The reason for this is that the Christian ethic is one that is positive. It is always a call to action rather than refraining from inaction. It demands the positive, rather than refrains from the negative. For example, we are told to love our enemies. It's a positive thing. Other philosophies have something similar but expressed in the negative. They say we are not to hate our enemies. You see that it's not the same thing. Loving someone is not the same as not hating them. Failing to hate someone only leads to indifference – not the positive kind of love that Christ demands and demonstrated throughout his earthly life. Christianity always focusses on the positive. It's not too hard to refrain from doing something hateful – it's far harder to go out of your way to do something positive for those who hate us.

But even more, we are told to do the extra thing. Jesus talks about sensible codes of conduct and dismisses them – what's so special about them, he asks? Your enemies can manage these things so what's so notable about you being able to do them? We can be as good as our neighbours, but Jesus demands us to be better. As the psalmist wrote in today's psalm, "Trust in the Lord and do good". Our faith is not simply based upon what we feel and believe. It is fundamentally demonstrated when we actually put that faith into action, for everyone, whether they are our best friends or our worst enemies.