

REVENGE & LOVE

Mt 5.38-48 Lev 19.17-18 1Cor 3.16-23

An opening Mass I celebrated with the young ladies and broader community at St Columba's College this week, focussed on the theme of compassion, the aptly-named Sisters of Charity having their tradition and ethos continued on in practice, with the college motto 'Faithful and strong' ('Fidelis et fortis') added to my Essendon stole, with Sister Josephine leading the way, along with many other Sisters in the front row at 102 this week (to whom we wished a very happy birthday).

There was a real sense of enthusiasm for working together in a supportive community of teachers, support staff and students, in the spirit of the Gospel, with a bookmark to mark the occasion, listing the need for 'listening, encouraging, connecting and (being) empathetic, the focal point being on 'compassion starts with you'. Lovely words, aren't they, but the challenge of course is to apply these thoughts in practice. And I reminded them that Project Compassion, highlighted next week from Ash Wednesday, is but one means of applying these principles by our own response to the needs of others. A generosity of spirit, by each of us, is called for.

And so we continue the discourse of Jesus about human behaviour, and how to improve it, and eternal work in progress, we might say. When we look today at the world around us, we might wonder about how little distance we have come since Jesus' wise words were spoken about how human relations and attitudes could be improved.

They were wild times back there, with life often being seen as short, sharp and brutish, with the background thought that it was necessary to look after oneself, followed by one's family or kin, before anyone else. There was a common view that revenge was fair enough, and the old adage 'revenge is sweet' was often enough applied once that revenge was achieved.

Progress could be seen along the way in human history, with the Lex Talionis ('an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth') being a step forward, in evening things out, from 'pillage the village', if someone wronged another from outside that village. (Remember the evil quote during the Vietnam War – 'We had to destroy the village to save it', incredibly used as justification for attacking civilian communities, and out of fear of some supporting the other side!!). Then there was the law of reciprocity, where it was seen as a good thing not to do to others what you wouldn't want done to yourself, a principle known as 'The Golden Rule', proclaimed by all of the mainstream world religions, where so often ignorance of the common ground between them, prevails.

Jesus clearly takes this further when he elaborates on the law of love, where he advocates not just forgiveness, but also love of enemies, a rather great leap forward and somewhat difficult, if not impossible for us to achieve in human terms. And yet, he is reminding us of our common humanity, and the need to work together in this imperfect but wonderful world, in which we find ourselves.

Once again, the Jerome Biblical Commentary highlights the persons of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as prime examples of applying this notion in practice, whereby injustice is challenged by non-violent non-co-operation and verbal proclamation, using the media in a positive way to highlight the truth of the wrongs in society and the need for reform and change for the betterment of all.

Jesus is not encouraging passivity in the face of evil, but active resistance and response to challenging wrongs with non-violence and practical example. The scripture commentary states: “Jesus is teaching a strategy for winning, not passive resignation or indifference to evil... Christianity is not introverted aggression, but aggression transmuted into a strategy of winning through the wisdom of love.”

“General conclusion on retaliation and love of enemies. We can trace a five stage evolution in biblical thinking... unlimited revenge, limited revenge (getting even), the silver rule ‘Do not do unto others as you would have them do unto you’, the golden rule... reaching out to do good, taking the initiative to create an atmosphere of good will; loving ones enemies, an invitation to moral heroism and sanctity... The sermon is not the whole of biblical revelation, but does represent a summit of moral wisdom whose validity proves itself in daily life when wisely applied.

As for being perfect, bad luck!! We’re never going to get there! Needless to say, there’s no harm in trying along the path of Christian life. One translation suggests a better word is ‘blameless’, doing our best not just to keep out of trouble, but to set good example by the moral choices we make and the actions we take to do the right thing by reaching out to each other in compassion, understanding and mercy.

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23rd February 2020

Earlier in the week, I had a marathon Ethics committee meeting at Royal Melbourne Hospital. Having accepted the invitation to be a member of this committee, as a minister with a pastoral role in the broader community, I had little idea of the ethical complexity and detail of the various research projects to be reviewed or revised. It made me more aware of the fact that nothing is simple in the field of human endeavour, the right to privacy, requirements of

protocols and procedures, along with the multitude and variety of areas of medical research. There are checks and balances required all the way through experimentation and treatment, as to what is best for the individual and the common good, and there is always more to discover, know, understand and hopefully do better, with treatment, therapy and care.