

Lent Compline Talks 2020 on Prayer

Prof John Morris, Monday of Holy Week, April 6th

7: *Pray for those who persecute you*; Psalms 91, 136; Chapter 1; Collects 1, 2, 3

Tonight, I'd like us to consider those difficult words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount which Matthew 5: 43-48 gives as "You have heard that it was said 'Love your neighbour' and 'hate your enemy'... But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward will you get? Don't even tax-collectors do that? Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." There's a similar passage in Luke 6:27 when Jesus says "I say love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

At first sight this seems a very hard ask. We instinctively feel we want to pray for those who are being persecuted; but praying for, loving, doing good to those who do the persecuting or hating, especially if it's we who are undergoing that persecution/hatred - that's difficult. Indeed, it's against our animal nature. In the OT there are numerous examples of people praying that God will smite their enemies in no uncertain terms. The idea of divinely sanctioned retribution has persisted from time immemorial and has often been the basis of exhortations during war. Indeed, the German philosopher Nietzsche, famous for his saying "that which does not kill us makes us stronger" argued that "to love one's enemies is just weakness and dishonesty".

Jesus was not the first to ask us to love/do good for our enemy. In Exodus we find "If you meet your enemy's ox or ass which has gone astray, you should return it to him". There are similar passages in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Similarly, in Proverbs 19 "A man's virtue is to overlook an offence" and Proverbs 25 "If your enemy is hungry give him bread, if thirsty give him a drink". And it's not just the OT. An even earlier Babylonian text says "Requite with kindness your evil doer" and an ancient Egyptian injunction reads "Do not react according to a man's evil nature; lift him up, give him your hand; leave him in the hands of God. Fill him with your own food that he may be ashamed." That is similar to the passage in Paul's letter to the Romans 12:14 "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Never pay back evil for evil". But then in 12:20 Paul does not talk of "shaming" a persecutor but he has the following very difficult phrase "For in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Now that is not what you'd call a friendly, loving gesture! The words are a literal translation of the original Greek. However, one view is that they reflect an Egyptian ritual of the period in which a guilty person, as a sign of repentance, carried a basin of glowing coals on his head. In other words, making the persecutor feel ashamed of their actions.

Those people who would persecute us, those we might see as enemies, are also children of God, our brothers and sisters, created in the same human form as Jesus. They, like us, may not be doing God's will, but they should never be a personal target of our aggression. We are told "Hate the evil deed, not the doer". Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us "Always treat others as you would wish to be treated".

So, let's look at what Jesus commands us to do for those who persecute us. We are told to pray for them; to do good to them; and to love them. Let's start with praying for them. Our prayer is to God, so this makes God a critical part of this endeavour. As we pray to God we can of course ask for strength for ourselves, but we should pray as if God loves the persecutor as much as he loves us. Therefore, we should pray that our 'enemies' will come to know more of God's love in Christ Jesus, and will wish to do his will; and that they, like us, may be forgiven their sins. Whether they take up that opportunity is between them and God. We have to accept that we cannot control the responses

of others. Praying for them may not bring about the change that we hope for, but what it will do is to stop the negative consequences of retaliation in us. Our newspapers show daily that the world is full of people repaying evil with more evil. But all that this does is to increase the amount of evil in the world. Often, people who persecute or abuse others are expecting or even hoping for some sort of retaliation. Turning the other cheek and praying for their good is the last thing they expect. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in "The cost of discipleship" wrote 'If our enemies take to cursing us, our immediate reaction must be to bless them; their curse can do no harm except to themselves'.

So finally, what about the injunction to 'love' our enemies? When Matthew was writing, the early church was facing great persecution under Nero. The word Matthew uses for love is *agapan*; this word, in distinction to our current use of 'loving', doesn't have any connotation of 'liking'. To 'love' in the *agapan* sense means 'to seek the highest good for' the person concerned. So, we are *not* asked to *like* those who persecute us or do us harm; but we *are* asked to hope that they will enjoy that 'highest good' which is the 'fruits of the spirit' (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians)); in short become more like Christ. As the Lord's Prayer makes clear, forgiving our enemies is part of that perfection to which we are all called and, as Paul writes to the Ephesians (4:31) "Let all bitterness, malice be put away; forgive one another even as God in Christ forgave you". We can't truly be "children of our heavenly father", unless we do. Martin Luther King summed it up this way "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."