

## Love your enemies

There was a man who had reached his 100th birthday, and was being interviewed by a reporter. "What are you most proud of?" the reporter asked.

"Well," said the man, "I don't have an enemy in the world."

"What a beautiful thought! How inspirational!" said the reporter.

"Yes," added the man, "I outlived every last one of them."

Today's gospel reading is from Luke Chapter 6, and is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Jesus' most famous sermon, is, of course, the Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew's gospel – and is regarded as one of the greatest speeches of all time – it is widely accepted, even beyond Christian circles, as wise and good moral teaching.

The most well known part of the sermon on the mount is the beatitudes - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Matt 5:1-4) And so on.

They're some of the most well-known verses of the bible. It is poetic, it is profound, it is wise and insightful, it is wonderful stuff.

The Sermon on the Plain contains similar verses, but goes on to tell us of woes as well as blessings, blessed are you who are poor (in verse 20), but woe to you who are rich (in verse 24)... blessed are you who hunger now (in verse 21), but woe to you who are well-fed now (in verse 25).

The sermon on the plain seems a bit harsher, which brings us neatly to today's reading, "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." (6:27).

Loving our enemies is just so far removed from what most people in the world do. So far removed from what we'd like to do.

Like the 100-year-old man who gloated about outliving all his enemies, that is so often our approach to dealing with our own enemies... to hope that we outlast and outlive them.

Sometimes we hope for bad things to happen to them. Sometimes we might even pray for bad things to happen to them!

Sometimes outlasting and outliving isn't good enough, and we start to take action against our enemies. Probably not violence... but there's plenty that we can do short of violence: gossip about them, spread lies about them, dob them in when they do something wrong, exclude them, and of course pray that God will punish them for their wicked ways.

Taking action is how most of the world deals with enemies. At the extreme, we go to war with them. We plan and plot their defeat. We undermine them. We rejoice in their failures and mourn at their successes. We write letters, make phone calls, send e-mails and muster up support among our friends. We try to get people to side with us and join the team of those who are angry at others.

That's the way the world often behaves towards its enemies, but that's not the Christian way. Or at least it shouldn't be.

Jesus said "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

This is something I often ponder: How do we or how can we show our love? So that people will know us by that show of love.

So often, in the modern world, people know Christians by their hate, not their love. Christians get angry about all sorts of things.

I guess at one extreme, there are those Christians who set themselves up as moral watchdogs, and get angry at the decline of "traditional values".

And at the other, those whose priority is fighting for social and environmental issues, and get angry at the power of traditional political, business and religious organisations.

Certainly, the scriptures talk about not loving the things of the world. We are called to be salt and light in a sinful world. We are called to speak out boldly with prophetic voices calling people to repentance.

But...

Whatever we do, we must be loving as we do it.

Jesus delivered a harsh message, but he did it with love, and in doing so he showed people the way.

It's okay to tell the truth... even a harsh truth... but we need to have compassion and mercy, not judgement. When we see things go wrong for our enemies, we shouldn't gloat... we should weep for them: They are the ones who are slaves to sin. They are the ones whose hearts are hardened.

Here in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus tells us what our attitude should be toward our enemies - those we would rather hate, and how to develop and live out that attitude. He says in Luke 6:27 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

Loving our enemies goes against what feels right or normal or fair to us. Loving our enemies is a challenging thing - because the feeling is not reciprocated.

It's easy to love someone who loves you... but to love someone who hates you – who works against you, who wants to hurt you – is something quite different.

But Jesus says love your enemies... and he doesn't qualify it... there's no limit to how bad they are and no limit to how long you must love them.

Of course, loving our enemies doesn't mean we have to approve of what they do, or agree with them, or even become good friends with them, but loving our enemies means that when they hate us, we love them in return. It means that the cycle of hate, the cycle of revenge, the cycle of retaliation, is broken – it stops with us. We can be angry at a person for what they do or what they say, and yet still love them, and still do good for them.

In fact, as we read through the gospel accounts, we see that Jesus loves his enemies. Even Judas. Jesus knew what Judas was doing but Jesus loved Judas anyway. He never slights Judas. Never has an unkind word for Him.

And of course, even as he was being crucified, he prayed for those who were crucifying him – "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

In his letter to the Romans (5:8) Paul tells us that God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Two verses later, we are told that while we were yet enemies of God, God reconciled us to Himself through the death of Jesus Christ.

And here in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus sets out how we should go about loving our enemies: do good to those who hate you.

But why? Why does Jesus want us to do good to those who hate us?

We might think it's because if we do enough good to our enemies, they will stop being our enemies, and become our friend. There's an account of Abraham Lincoln, at a reception during the American Civil War, made a passing reference to the Confederates as "erring human beings." – which was fairly kind way to refer to them – and one woman criticized him for his choice of words. She thought they were enemies to be destroyed, and the sooner the better. She wanted the president to use much harsher, much more disparaging terms. "Why, Madam," replied Lincoln, "do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

And he was right, of course. We do destroy our enemies when we make them our friends. But I think history and our own experience tells us that it doesn't work like that very often.

To be fair, doing good for an enemy might cause him or her to become a friend, but hating and harming an enemy never will.

But while doing good to our enemies might make them our friends, but that's not why Jesus tells us that's what we should be doing. Instead, it is only by showing love to our enemies, and doing good to those who hate us that we can show to them the love of God. And maybe, maybe, if we show them the love of God, they will experience something they have never experienced before, and will want more of it.

We show our love to our enemies because that's how God wants us to be known to them.

We show love to our enemies because that is exactly what God has done for us when we were God's enemies, and that is how we were brought into God's family, and that is how, hopefully, how our enemies can be brought into God's family too.

But Jesus doesn't stop at telling us to do good to those who hate us, it gets harder:

"[...]bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back." (6:28-30)

So you don't have to just do good to them, you have to let them do bad to you. If they curse you, bless them. If they say bad things about you, say something nice about them.

If they mistreat you, pray for them. Not pray that justice will be done to them, or even pray that they will stop mistreating you, but pray for them.

If people take from you, give them even more.

And give to everyone who asks you. For a long time I was really good at ignoring beggars. It's not so much of an issue in St Ives, but if you venture into the city or even Chatswood and sometimes Gordon these days, there's quite a few beggars around. From aggressive ones who accost you as you walk along, to passive ones that sit on corner with writing on a piece of cardboard that tells you their particular tale of misfortune.

But as I say, I was good at ignoring them. But since re-reading this passage a few years ago, I've reconsidered. I know all the arguments about them only wanting money for alcohol or drugs... but compared to having to do good to those who hate me, giving some change to someone who's prepared to humble themselves to ask for it like that, is probably no too much of an ask.

I can honestly say that I've had some good experiences giving to beggars – and some bad ones, too, but mostly good.

I've also heard of people who give to beggars in other ways instead of cash. Handing them sandwiches. Taking them to the nearest fast food place and buying them a meal. Or something. As Jesus tells us, it's the giving that's important.

And not only that, Jesus says if someone takes your stuff, don't ask for it back! That's another one that's really tough for us, because we tend to have a lot of stuff. And we like to hang on to it. If you've ever borrowed my pen, you probably know that I'm pretty keen on getting it back. So I might have some way to go with that one, too.

And then in verse 31, Jesus says "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

We would hope that others would be nice to us, so we should be nice to them. If we're wondering how we should treat others, Jesus says it's easy: Just treat them as you would like to be treated.

Jesus goes on to warn us about being selective in our love: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. (32-33)

So, Jesus is saying we should do these things, not to benefit ourselves or those near us, but in order to share our love, and in doing so, to *witness to God's love*.

Verse 35 reiterates "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back." And then goes on to say "Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Everything that Jesus tells his followers to do, is tied to what God has done for us through Jesus.

Be merciful - just as God is merciful.

Give - just as God gives.

Love those who hate you - just as God loves even those who hate him.

Finally, Jesus warns us: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned." (37a,b). Judgement is needed because what is wrong with the world needs to be addressed, but judgement and ultimately condemnation, are never up to us. They're not up to any person, as much as some people set themselves up to judge and condemn. They're up to God.

The things Jesus calls us to do are not easy, and quite often they won't be pleasant, either. And we won't get them right all the time either.

But Jesus assures us when he says "Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (37c-38).

The gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, is the most wonderful gift of all. It is freely given, but as we accept that gift, we need to

heed Jesus' words. If we become children of God – children of the Most High, as Jesus said – then we need to show that in our lives. Show our family resemblance, if you like.

But we live in a fallen world. There are people who will be our enemies. The question for us is how we deal with them. Do we try and outlive and outlast them? Do we try and undermine or discredit them? Do we fight them. Or do we love them, no matter what the cost, just as God first loved us?

Amen.