

Sermon 23rd February 2014.

Matthew 5:38-48.

This week's sermon continues the theme in Matthew 5, from what is often called the 'sermon on the mount'.

Last week we read that Jesus said he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them. Our Rector David went on to say that far from abolishing the laws, Jesus actually intensified each one. The purpose for Jesus doing this was to show that as followers of Jesus Christ we must not only keep the Law because God tells us to. Rather, we must allow the laws to change us inwardly so that we develop a character that reflects the character of God.

The verses in our Gospel reading today are equally challenging.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

If these words of Jesus are taken seriously and obeyed, they can have deep implications on both a personal and a community level and indeed on an international level as well.

Once again Jesus gives the reason for intensifying the command from 'love your neighbour' to 'love your enemies.' If we claim to have God as our Father we must live as God lives. Jesus points out that God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and that he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. God does not show favouritism, or pay back evil for evil. God does good to all, even those who are doing wrong. And Jesus tells us to be like him.

This is very challenging to us. Sometimes it is even difficult to love those who are close to us, let alone to love those whom we might call our enemies. How are we to do this?

Most of us are probably familiar with the story of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman who wrote a book about the story of her life in Holland during the war. Her family hid several Jewish people in their home. This was found out by the

Nazis. They were arrested and taken to a concentration camp where eventually Corrie saw her sister, Betsie, brutally killed by a Nazi guard. She tells the story of how she learned to forgive and love her enemies.

We are able to learn from what she wrote. Here is part of her story in her own words.

"It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there -- the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."

Here are the keys for us to learn how to love our enemies. For someone to be our enemy it usually means that something awful has been done to us, or to our family, or even to our country. An enemy might not even be someone that we know personally.

In order for us to love them, it is usually necessary for us to first forgive them for the wrong they have done to us, or to our family, or to our country. Once we have been able to forgive them, we are free to choose to love them.

In the case of Corrie ten Boom, she wanted to forgive the man, but found herself unable to do so. So she prayed and first asked God to forgive her for the hatred that was still in her heart. She then asked God for the ability to forgive, and as she took the first small step by holding out her hand to him, God's forgiveness flowed into her and through her. And then the love of God filled her, and she was able to choose to love him.

When we have been deeply hurt or wounded by someone, we need to bring that hurt to God, deal with the anger and resentment that has built up inside us. Then we can ask God to help us to forgive, and he will help us.

We can never judge others who hold on to hatred or unforgiveness, because we are unable to understand another person's hurt.

But we do know that someone living with hatred and unforgiveness lives in a prison of their own making. God longs for them to be released from that and will give the ability to forgive and love; if it is sincerely desired.

If nations that call themselves Christian put these words of Jesus into practise the world could be a very different place. As nations call other nations enemies, and hate them, and use propaganda to affect the minds of all those who live in that nation, wars are justified. Millions die unnecessary deaths and suffering becomes the norm.

Right here in these words of Jesus is a recipe for world peace, and the known will of God.

Jesus lived out the truth of his own words. He forgave and loved his enemies, right to the end, with some of his last words on earth being, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Let us ponder these words of Jesus this week and ask God to show us our own hearts. If we are harbouring any unforgiveness, let us ask God to help us, so that we can truly be children of God who rightly represent our Father in Heaven.

