

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 19th February 2023 – Epiphany 7

(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer)

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Psalm 119:33-40

1Corinthians 3:10-17

Matthew 5:38-48

Last weekend I visited congregations in Cunnamulla, Charleville, and Mitchell... and, it was warm! First prize would have gone to the faithful congregation at St Alban's, Cunnamulla, where it was 42 degrees outside and inside the church... so, we retreated to someone's airconditioned home for the AGM!

Daily temperatures were certainly less extreme during the week when eighteen of our Anglican School principals met together with the bishops for the annual three-day retreat at Hidden Vale. Throughout the year bishops and school heads meet at board room tables to discuss school enrolments, strategy, and compliance, but the retreat is a time for prayer, teaching, and fellowship. In preparation we had all been tasked to read an excellent book by Sam Wells called, 'Humber Faith, Bigger God' – which has the tag line '*Finding a Story to Live by...*' and it was a helpful catalyst for discussion.

In the set readings for Morning and Evening Prayer both bishops and school heads agreed that when we read the Bible we often find things that are challenging and need to be unpacked. This weekend's Gospel is a good example!

When we read or listen to this text it's helpful to remember that Jesus lived in an occupied territory. It was not a free country. The Romans had invaded, and forcibly made Palestine part of their Empire. They imposed their language, their administration, and their taxes, while Roman soldiers enforced law and order. Roman soldiers were allowed, by law, to commandeer the labour of any local person and force them to carry their baggage for up to one mile without remuneration. After that they could commandeer someone else! What uncertainty this would have brought to local people going about their everyday lives, and how resented those soldiers must have been.

Into that context Jesus said, '*If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile!*' It may not seem subversive now, but it would have been back then. The first mile the Roman soldier was entitled to, but the second mile would have been given by choice! It's tempting to think that Mahatma Gandhi was the founder of non-violent resistance in an English occupied India. But non-violence was articulated long before Gandhi in these words of Jesus: "*...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, **turn the other also...** if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, **give your cloak as well...** and if anyone forces you to go one mile, **go also the second mile.**"*

These words turn on their head the human inclination to seek revenge when we've been wronged, or when someone we love has been wronged. This natural inclination is given some boundary in the Old Testament phrase, *'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* You hurt me – and I'll hurt you. You hurt my child... and you will be sorry!

Because the words of Jesus challenge our natural inclination to seek revenge, we probably all feel uncomfortable when we hear them. Jesus seems to be saying here 'I know what you normally do, and I understand why. But, I want you to respond differently!' Further, 'God knows and wants you to do this differently, and respond in a way that does not escalate things.'

An important footnote here is that this verse and the verses around it should never be used to justify abuse, or force someone who is experiencing abuse to remain in a situation that is demeaning or dangerous. Important to remember this when considering the next direction to love enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It is often wise and appropriate in situations of abuse to love and pray from a safe distance.

At a macro level we have rarely seen enemies loving or praying for each other but have rather seen variations of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' At the end of the First World War the punitive reparations imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles were so damaging to the German economy that its people turned to the fascist ideology of National Socialism. Later, in the aftermath of World War Two, some lessons had been learnt so there were no financial reparations, but there were the Nuremburg trials.

Closer to our time in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York twenty two years ago there was a strong Old Testament response as America and her allies invaded first Afghanistan, and then Iraq.

In contrast there have been at least four examples of civil conflict in which the inclination for revenge has been transcended and a New Testament response has been followed. They are the *'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'* process used in South Africa - post-apartheid; the *'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'* process used in Ambon - post the violence between Muslim and Christian communities; the *'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'* process used in the Solomon Islands – post the Malaita insurgency; and the peace movement in Northern Ireland. I could unpack each of these and though they would be interesting to learn more about, we might be distracted from the personal challenge implicit in today's Gospel!

I invite you to imagine Jesus speaking to you, and I'm going to use my name as an example: 'Cameron... I want you to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you!' If you haven't inwardly gulped, maybe you should say it to yourself again. God wants you and me to 'Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.'

‘Though I have had family members experience violence from home invasion I have not had the experience that many friends from South Sudan and Afghanistan live with. The traumatic experience of family members and friends being killed by others. I have discussed the challenge of forgiveness with South Sudanese friends over the years and the response has often been, “I forgive them Bishop, but I don’t trust them!”

I don’t think there are people who want to kill me – and I hope this is also true for you also! But, in the lived experience of human relationships: families, work colleagues, schools, and church congregations, we can readily find people who don’t like each other, who undermine each other, who lie to one another, and tell half-truths in calculated gossip. People who resent another person for reasons that are not clear, and who are unkind... again, and again, and again.

As I say this can I ask you to consider some important questions, and as I ask these of you please be assured that I ask them of myself at the same time. Do you have a sense of someone being your enemy at this time? Is there a person you feel particularly let down by? Is there a person who has wounded you by their words or actions and doesn’t seem to care? Is there a person who constantly misunderstands you, and consistently perceives you in a negative way?

If any of this rings true... can we hear in a new way the command for us to love and pray for and pray for those people?’

Let’s pray...

Holy God, thank you for the challenge to love those who are difficult to love, and those who have wronged us. Through your Spirit help us to pray for your blessing on their lives, trusting you in all things. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen