

**Trinity XII, 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020****Romans 12:9-21: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good**

A reminder, if any need it, of what the Gospel is.

You exist because you are loved. You are not a random by-product of the universe, a chemical and biological accident, you are the son or daughter of God. You were made for a purpose: to be, in your own unique way, the glory of God. To live out in flesh and blood what it is to be pure love, joy, and beauty. And even though collectively we have done our best to wreck all that, because of Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection, it can all still happen. God has come into the midst of the human disaster, and begun the great setting right. There is hope, sure and certain hope, even for the most damaged, the most lost.

You've heard me preach that many times. Today though, a question. Given that all of that is true – how should we deal with our enemies?

Let us start at what should be the easy level, though sadly experience suggests it is not. How do you deal with those who speak to you in a funny tone of voice? Those who have been very sharp with you, or perhaps downright rude? Those who disregard your suggestions, or say unkind, disrespectful or just dishonest things about you?

Well, the answer is quite simple. You remember who you are, and you remember who they are. They may indeed be idiots. But before that, they are God's children and destined for glory. How dare you snipe at them, hurt them, and freeze them out? And remember, you too may be an idiot, as well as God's beloved child. Odds are you play exactly the same role in somebody's else mind as your enemy does in yours. There is plenty of stuff for which you need a bit of slack cut, a bit of understanding and mercy, a bit of a second chance ... and a third, and a fourth. So remember who they are, who you are, and get over yourself.

But what about *really* bad people? What about say, the Christchurch mosque killer, sentenced this week to life imprisonment without parole? The judge said to him: ‘Your crimes are so wicked that even if you are detained until you die, it will not exhaust the requirements of punishment.’ Well, was this judge not a Christian? Because surely the *Christian* thing to do would be to forgive this killer. He is, after all, a beloved child of God, created for glory and saved by Jesus. If we punish him at all, surely we should do so in a way that looks to change him, to make it possible for him to be released back into society as soon as possible, so his life at least could continue, could flourish? Isn’t that what Romans 12 teaches: bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them; if your enemies are hungry feed them, if they’re thirsty give them something to drink. Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Surely that’s what Christians do?

Well, not really. First of all, just notice that next week, if our lectionary compilers had sufficient nerve, they wouldn’t skip straight from Romans 12 – as they do – to the second half of Romans 13. They’d have us read the first half, which amongst other things contains the classic text justifying the use of capital punishment: ‘the ruler does not bear the sword in vain! He is the servant of God, to execute wrath on the wrong-doer.’ And for most of Christian history, until pretty much yesterday, most of the Church has thought that in certain circumstances the death penalty was fully justified. Now we may be very glad that most of the Church has changed its mind on this – another example of that moral change I spoke of last week - but what we can’t say is that no Christian could ever support the death penalty. Most have. Indeed, Article 37 of the 39 Articles makes support for the death penalty, for certain offences, a necessary part of being Anglican!

But even if we don’t think the State should kill people, there are good Christian reasons for thinking that certain crimes should be punished very fiercely indeed. Putting a murderer or a rapist or an abuser away for a very long time, perhaps forever, is about defending the weak and the vulnerable. It’s about making sure that particular offender doesn’t do it again, and spelling out to everyone else quite how high the price is if they do. Even if the victim of a terrible crime manages to forgive, *still* the State has a duty to make the sky fall in on the offender. No Christian is required to be soft when it comes to punishing crime.

But even so, you might say, the victim personally is still required to forgive, aren't they? The State must punish - but the victim has to forgive. Jesus really wants us to send food parcels to killers inside their prison cells, and visit them, and tell them we love them? Well, I won't, says the victim, or the victim's family. I can't do that to the person who did *this* to me. I wish them every kind of ill. They should thank God they are in prison, or I'd go and kill them myself.

We need to pause before criticising that kind of reaction. Yes, it is not attractive. Yes, there are passages in the Gospels where Jesus warns very sternly against it. We must indeed try to forgive, insofar as we possibly can. Yet there's the rub. Insofar as we possibly can.

Sometimes the wicked hurt us so badly, damage us so badly, that even the capacity to forgive is wiped out. I sometimes think that if you find it easy to forgive, maybe even if you find it *possible* to forgive, you haven't quite grasped how evil some people can be. If, on occasion, you have not simply wanted the scum to suffer, there is probably a vital part of your moral equipment not functioning properly. To feel like this is right and proper when faced with radical evil.

But .... And it is a very big but: *Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. Vengeance is mine.* And the entire point of that is that it is *not* yours. You are not qualified to execute judgement on one of God's creatures. You don't know, no matter how much you think you do, precisely what they deserve. And even if you did, and you took it upon yourself to deliver it, you'd wreck yourself as you did. Vengeance might taste sweet, but it is too strong for creatures like you, says God. It's so strong it even turns poisonous: in your hands, in your hearts, vengeance turns into hatred. Justice turns into evil. Your souls can't cope with it. It'll burn them up and destroy them from inside. Trust me, says God. Only I can handle justice. Trust me.

And here's the still harder thing. When you do trust God, when you surrender the claim to be the Judge, you have to accept who the Judge is. The Judge is the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Who, whilst he is not soft, and whilst he does not ignore the terrible evil your enemy has done, is nonetheless not you. You, small and wounded as you are, can only hate. Your ability to love has been devastated, wiped out, by the crimes committed against you. But God is not you, and his love is never wiped out. Even the worst killer in the world cannot undo the fact that in the beginning, he was the beloved child of God and was made for glory. And in Jesus Christ God has done, and will do, everything he possibly can to make that glory happen.

So when you hand judgement over to God, that means you have to accept there still might be hope, even for the most vile. You don't have to feel warm and fuzzy about them; you don't have to stop feeling the hurt and the pain they have caused you, and the rage. But you *do* have to allow that there might be hope, even for them. That's not to say they're definitely going to heaven, that their ending is definitely joy. Only one thing is definite: the sure and certain hope that in God love and justice and mercy meet. What that means for each particular individual when they meet God is God's business, not ours. Quite simply, we are not qualified.

Back to the Gospel. Each and everyone of us began as the beloved child of God, made by love and destined for love. In our different ways, each and everyone of us fell short of that, in many cases more deeply and disastrously short than we could possibly imagine, and anyone else will ever know. God in Jesus came to rescue each and everyone of us, to deal all the secrets of all our hearts. He will do so with perfect justice, perfect mercy, and all shot through with love. It is not up to us to tell him how to do it, much as we long to do so. And for that, thanks be to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

