

7th Sunday (A)

23rd February 2014

'Love your enemies'

Lev 19: *you must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart*

Mt 5:38–48: *love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.*

We have heard the continuation of last week's excerpt from the Lord's 'Sermon on the Mount,' and if we have been listening and truly praying these Gospel passages in our heart — not just letting the words wash over us to no effect, but truly letting them sink in and affect us, change us, for the better — then I think that we would all admit that the 'Sermon on the Mount' is a *big* challenge! The teaching of Christ is not out-dated, irrelevant, or boring ... but in fact goes right to the crux of what it means to be human, to live in society, to relate well to others, and to please God.

Last week we heard Jesus giving a new, deeper, and Christian understanding to three of the 'old laws': "Do not kill ...", "Do not commit adultery ...", "Do not break your oath ..." Today we hear Him tackle two more traditional teachings: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth ...", and its continuation, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." That last phrase, "hate your enemy" isn't actually

in the Old Testament at all. But Jesus is presumably implying that that had come to be the accepted meaning: "Love your neighbour" only in so far as they are neighbourly back, or they are people you like, or get on with, or give you something in return. But this will not do, for Jesus, and it will not do for us. "Love your neighbour," says the Old Testament, and Jesus redefines that to mean all humanity. There can be no limits to our love; we cannot pick and choose, and make distinctions between person and person. In fact, in one of His toughest sayings, Jesus lays before us the challenge: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Not one of us here would dare to say that that is an easy teaching to follow. Perhaps we might even be tempted to say, that's too hard a teaching even to think possible; far too idealistic; ... beyond me. Yet Our Lord does not present it to us an option, something to consider if we feel up to it. Do we have people in mind with whom we are not at present on good terms? Has someone done something to us that we are not willing to forgive? —

Some hurt or some action that has wounded us, and so we have cut them off? — Someone we've not talked to for ages, perhaps years, and leaving unforgiven? Into these ordinary, but sad, situations, the words of Jesus break with force, but also with the offer of peace. We must take up Jesus's command: "love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." If you aren't yet in a position to contact them, face them, forgive them (yet), then at least take them in to your prayer. Pray for them; pray for the strength to forgive them in due course. Only this is in keeping with the Catholic faith, not harbouring grudges and letting hurts fester and ruin relationships for years.

Let me share with you a story which goes to prove that even in the hardest situations of conflict there can be a real living out of this Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the Central African Republic there is presently a dreadful and escalating conflict between Muslim militias and so-called Christian militias. A lot of tit-for-tat killing, maiming, destroying of villages, whole populations at risk. In this situation of cruel carnage, in

the small town of Boali, a local Catholic priest, Fr Xavier-Arnauld Fagba, has taken seriously the Gospel message of conquering revenge with forgiveness. Knowing that local Muslim residents in his locality were in imminent danger of being killed if they stayed at home, in mid-January he invited them into his church to find sanctuary, 650+ of them! He knew that the militias were unlikely to enter the church in pursuit of their victims. Here in the church Fr Xavier-Arnauld, along with his parishioners, has cared for their Muslim brothers and sisters for over a month, keeping them safe from what would otherwise be almost certain death. His parishioners bring food for them. They celebrate Mass in the church with the Muslims' belongings still scattered about the church. And after Mass they go and exchange a sign of friendship with the Muslim people they are sheltering. The parish has done this, despite the danger to themselves, and despite themselves having suffered in the past at the hands of Muslim militia men. They have really listened to the definitive words of Jesus who tells us: "But I say this to you, love your enemies, and

pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven.” May we also listen to Jesus’s words, and decide that we too will have the courage to break down the walls of hatred, and reach out across conflicts, arguments, and feuds. This is the only way to behave as ‘children of our heavenly Father.’

[Weblinks for the BBC and the *Daily Telegraph* stories on Fr Xavier-Arnauld Fagba in the C.A.R. can be found on the parish website under ‘Something to Click On’]