

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday (A)

19<sup>th</sup> February 2017

'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.*

When I was a boy in St Albans, I was at a Catholic school, and so, with my sister, I used to walk home exactly the opposite way along the road to all the boys going home from the local boys' school. Eventually, as I suppose always happens, there was a boy whom I would pass daily who took a dislike to me, for no reason, and gradually became more and more aggressive to me and my sister. First verbally, and then to the point where I thought he was going to hit me. On the first occasion when it seemed as if he would hit me, as he approached me, I simply held him at an arm's length as we passed, and though he did hit me from behind on the head, I simply let it happen and went on my way with my sister not even turning to look. It was an unpleasant moment in a young life — I still remember it — but I also saw then and there that it put paid to that aggression once and for all. I defended myself simply and without retaliation, and the problem was actually solved.

This Sunday's Gospel passage continues the theme of

last week's: *You have learnt how it was said of old ... but I say this to you ...* Jesus, in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is redefining and refining their understanding of the Law: no longer are they to interpret it in the minimum possible way, but they are to exercise it to the maximum. According to Jesus, interpretation of the 10 commandments isn't to be done at a superficial level, but for the Christian is to be a deeper exercise of love and goodness. So, today's verses remind us very forcefully that vengeance and hatred of those who aren't good to us is not something that we can contemplate as followers of Christ. These are really hard verses of the Gospel to hear; it's here that the challenge of the Gospel can become really tough going!

In the Old Testament the law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was a way of limiting vengeance and recompense. It was a step forward for the people of Israel, so that they did not trade in escalating violence: if someone took a sheep, then their liability was just for one sheep; in the past, perhaps, if someone had stolen a sheep they might find that vengeance was exacted and their whole village

burnt down in retaliation. The O.T. law was a thorough-going improvement, so that the people of Israel were proud of their law, given them by God that they might live a good life, an ordered life, based on God's commandments.

But Jesus takes it upon Himself to re-interpret the Law, to take it a whole step further on. And nowhere does it get more exacting than here, in the analysis of retaliation and the treatment of one's enemies. Jesus reminds us that it's of no great merit just to "love those who love you." There's no great challenge or merit in that ... What is worthy of a good life is to treat well those who do *not* treat you well. That's where the difference truly comes; that's where forgiveness can begin and a change truly be made.

I'm sure that we've all got situations in which it is hard to forgive, hard not to want to retaliate, hard not to 'get our own back' or get 'justice' as we might see it. But all such attempts to retaliate in anger or hatred are not going to be helpful; they are never going to be God's will for us; they are never going to make for peace. Instead, we have to have the strength that Jesus talks of here in the Gospel, the

strength that allows us to rise above our hurts. Jesus, as we know, manifested just this attitude of forgiveness and not an attitude of retaliation when He was taken to the Cross. Jesus, above all, could have claimed an unfair trial, an unjust sentence, a totally unjustified assault as He went to the Cross ... and yet in fact He said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." He shows just what it means to love perfectly, to love without hatred or retaliation against those who wish us harm. Jesus's teachings and His actions are perfectly in harmony: he practises just what He preaches, and commands us to do the same.

Whether it's a current situation of injustice, or suffering; or a past hurt that we are clinging on to as a grudge; we need to let it go and allow Christ to act in us as He would want, forgiving more generously than one would think possible, allowing another the benefit of a kindness and a gentleness that they would not have expected. Let's not dismiss Jesus's teaching as idealistic or beyond our capabilities. We must live it, so as to make a difference: *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*