

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

23<sup>rd</sup> February 2019

'Breaking the cycle'

1Sam 26: *'I would not raise my hand'*

Ps 102: *He does not treat us according to our sins*

1Cor 15: *we will be modelled on the heavenly man*

Lk 6: 27–38: *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you*

Easter is late this year ... and therefore so is Lent: Ash Wednesday isn't till the 6<sup>th</sup> March. It means we get to hear more of the Ordinary-Time Sunday readings this year (wks 6, 7, 8 ...) such as that powerful passage in Luke ch. 6 today, which we wouldn't otherwise get to hear.

I'm sure that we can all recount very moving moments when we have heard people in situations of great tragedy utter words of forgiveness and reconciliation, perhaps against all the odds. Just ten days ago, during the trial of her mugger, we heard that the 100-yr-old Polish lady in Derby — a survivor of Auschwitz — before she died from her injuries, prayed for the one who had attacked her. "Despite the pain and suffering that she was in for the last week of her life, she had the capacity to pray for her attacker before she died," we were told. And I will never forget the words of the parents of the stabbed teenager, Jimmy Mizen, back in 2008 in Lewisham, who used their

very first press statement after Jimmy died to express forgiveness of his killer — and have since gone on to campaign widely for peace and reconciliation. People like this have found it in themselves to summon up from within their long experience of a Christian faith the courage to preach peace and not anger; reconciliation and not revenge.

It's the message of today's readings. Jesus urges us to love and forgive our enemies, just as He loved and forgave His enemies, the ones who had Him crucified: *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.* Jesus can do it, but can we? Can we seriously expect to love those who are always difficult to us, or make our life a misery? Well, Jesus obviously thinks we can, otherwise He wouldn't suggest it. And the experience of human history is that people *can* turn away from hatred and make a difference, but someone has to make a start. We saw it on larger scales, too, with the ending of apartheid in South Africa; in the collapse of the communist system in the former Soviet Union; and in Northern Ireland: at some point, some leader or other had to have the guts to say

‘enough is enough’ and call a halt to aggression and oppression. Somewhere along the line, someone had to break the cycle of violence and recrimination and argument, and make a unilateral move for peace. Retaliation and counter-retaliation only escalates a war. Eventually someone (perhaps just one person) has to stop tit-for-tat first, someone has to opt for peace first.

David, in the Old Testament, is exemplary, as we heard in the 1<sup>st</sup> reading. King Saul is jealous of David’s popularity and is pursuing him to kill him. But even when David has this opportunity to kill Saul, he doesn’t take it: he doesn’t want vengeance, he wants peace with Saul alive, and he knows that peace is better achieved by compassion than by further violence.

In the arguments and family quarrels we might find ourselves in from time to time we also must take Our Lord’s example: someone has got to go for peace first; someone has got to begin the forgiving, and that someone should be me. Even if we’re not convinced that the other person in the argument will respond kindly. But that is not our

problem; our concern is to forgive. If you set an example of forgiveness, then maybe the other will imitate you; maybe they won’t, maybe they’ll continue trying to hurt us, but at least they won’t just be feeding off our retaliation. Our duty before God is to try; to try and break the cycle of argument. We can’t answer for the actions of another, but we *can* answer for ours, and Jesus asks of us a difficult but not impossible thing, to love those who are not always nice to us. He doesn’t ask anything of us which He hasn’t done Himself. To take up Jesus’s challenge to be forgiving strikes at the heart of hatred, and even if you’re still hated back for taking the trouble, at least you know that there’s less hate around when you don’t hate too.

To be forgiving is to be a person of strength, not a person of weakness. It’s why our hearts are filled with deep respect for those, moved by the Spirit, who utter brave words of forgiveness, not anger. We, too, should take Jesus at His word. We, too, can be forgiving, even when it is hard. Let’s ask our Blessed Lord in this Mass today to help melt any unforgiveness that still festers in our hearts today.