

## Impossible Love

Leviticus 19:15-18, 33-34, Luke 6:27-38

20<sup>th</sup> February 2022

I have recently watched a very engaging film, called *A beautiful day in the neighbourhood*. It is based on a true story about Mr Rogers, a children's TV presenter for many years in America brilliantly portrayed by Tom Hanks. Mr Rogers was an unbelievably good person. He was loved by everybody, children and adults alike. He was kind, spoke gently, and listened intently. According to Tom Hanks it was as if Mr Rogers took upon himself a kind of 'spiritual mandate' not just to teach the children, but to embody in himself his core teaching, that no matter how you look, or feel, whether you are happy or sad, angry or frustrated, you are special and loved unconditionally by this lovely man on your TV screen. The film is about his encounter with a cynical journalist and the way his friendship heals this man. At some point Mr Rogers says, he never met a person he didn't like. What a statement! I am sure I couldn't say that. Could you?

Well, let's leave Mr Rogers for now and turn to our Gospel reading for today, where we see that, we are still on that level ground with Jesus, where we have listened to him last Sunday in the company of his original disciples. The blessings and woes, he pronounced, are still ringing in our ears as parts of the so-called 'Sermon on the Plain'. But as we come to today's passage it becomes clear that, Jesus has not finished at that point. In fact, he has just arrived at the very kernel of his vision, the most radical of his teachings, which would constitute the new community he was hoping to form; it is his 'Love Commandment'.

Of course, talking about love was not new, or controversial, or radical in itself. In our first reading from the Book of Leviticus we heard how ancient Israel was expected to practice love as people of the Covenant. First and foremost they were to love God and then to love their neighbour as themselves. Leviticus is not a book we turn to very often. In the whole of the three year cycle of the Lectionary there are only two readings from it that are used, our passage being one of them. It is a Book about covenantal requirements and it is in the form of a command by Moses to the Israelites, which he received from God. The Book was probably given its final form during the exile by priestly editing, when it was most important to preserve

Israel's faith in an alien, hostile environment. It is about God's holiness, which is the reason why the people of a holy God must also be holy. The Chapter we heard from starts with the injunction: "You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy".

Although Luke's Jesus doesn't mention it, there is no doubt, what he has to say about love is based on the Leviticus passage and Luke is aware of Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount' too. The command to the Israelites to love their neighbours could, in a sense be understood as a means of separation from others. To be holy means to be set apart from the hum-drum. Listening to our first reading, it would be easy to think that the Israelites were supposed to love all sort of people. There are five different categories mentioned: *fellow-countryman, your father's kin, your neighbour, your brother and your kinsfolk*. But on closer look, it is nothing more than Hebrew Parallelism, a kind of literary device using different words meaning the same thing. All of these designations mean, members of God's chosen people, 'people like you', to the exclusion of those outside this definition. There is one notable exception as we heard: the love command is to be extended to the resident aliens, who are to be treated as part of the nation. Which would have been good news for me, if I lived in Israel at that time!

Jesus clearly comes from the same background, when he puts love in the centre of his programme for his new community. But he develops the ancient command well beyond its accepted meaning when he utters the unprecedented command: love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you spitefully. Nothing like this had ever been said in the Bible before Jesus. There is plenty there about enemies, of course. For example we have a special category of Psalms, called the 'Cursing Psalms', which, actually pray 'down' curses on Israel's enemies. The nation's special status was taken to mean 'whoever is my enemy, is God's enemy'.

Jesus was aware of this. He understood human nature with its egocentric, self-preserving needs. But he also came to see that, adhering to the letter of the Law on this subject was not enough, that it betrayed only a partial knowledge of God. If God is merely a personal God, or even a tribal, national God, who has special favourites, then it may be justified to enrol God on your side against your/God's enemies and perhaps even hate them. But Jesus' God is much bigger than this, whose unconditional love and care embraces

everything and everybody, friend and foe alike. And Jesus makes the staggering claim that the way to live with this great God is not to have enemies.

How can you do that? The story goes that a reporter interviewed an old man on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and asked him what he was most proud of. 'Well' – said the man- 'I don't have an enemy in the world!' 'What a beautiful thought! How inspirational!' – said the reporter. 'Yes', added the centenarian – 'I have outlived every last one of them'. So, this is one way of not having enemies.

Jesus' way is much harder, he tells his disciples to love their enemies, for as someone said "those who love their enemies, have no enemies".

But, why should we do this totally impossible thing that goes against the grain? Actually, it is easier to answer this question than to give advice on how to go about it in our daily life. We have already hinted at the major reason. We have to love our enemies, because we know that God loves them as much as us. In effect, Jesus abolishes the category of 'enemy', because God is equally kind to the worthy and the unworthy. Also, however impossible it may be, we have to choose love instead of hate, because *"hate can never drive out hate, only love can do that"*, to quote from a sermon by Martin Luther King. He refers to another reason in the same sermon when he says, *"Some people said this was the proof that Jesus was an impractical idealist, who never quite came down to earth. But far from it, Jesus is a practical realist, and we now see it with a new urgency that this command is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilisation. Yes, it is love that will save our world, our civilization, love, even for enemies"*.

So, how do we deal with our enemies? It may be an easier question to ask, how do we deal with people who don't like us, or with the people we don't like. Mr Rogers' advice to the children, in the film I mentioned earlier, was to talk about it, to listen to those who don't like us and find out why they don't like us. And look inside ourselves to see, what is it that makes us dislike some people. But when speaking to Mr Rogers' wife, the journalist discovers the way Mr Rogers himself manages to like everyone. It turns out he puts a lot of effort into it. Even to him, a thoroughly good person, it doesn't always come easily. He is determined to do it, he practices it hard and he develops strategies to deal with his natural feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment.

It is very hard, virtually impossible to love one's enemies, especially those who hurt us in some major way. The kind you read about in the newspapers, like losing loved ones to deliberate crime or criminal negligence, acts of abuse or terrorism. But even in the face of those events I like Mr Rogers' determination not to give in to the instinctive feelings of anger, revenge or at least, ill will. It has been said that love has to come from the heart. This may be true but there also has to be a kind of deliberate effort to shut down the justifiable negative feelings, which also reside in our hearts and to work on liberating the loving feelings. And that takes time.

I also like the insight that emphasises the role of the Christian community in fulfilling this impossible love command. The commands were given to the disciples as a group, which consisted of different individuals with different strength and weaknesses. Just like our church communities today. Could it be that though the hard commands of loving enemies, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, may be impossible to particular individuals at a given time, but that within a community different members can take turns to step up to the plate, when others can't?

When I am weak, there is always someone stronger beside me. When I can't pray, there is a circle, whose spiritual mandate is to keep praying. When I feel resentment, unable to forgive, there are those who hold my hands, forgive my sins and do not stop loving me. So, as we come to the table of thanksgiving we give thanks to God for the precious gift of the church family around us whose compassion makes it possible for us to walk the seemingly impossible way of Christ. We give thanks for the authors of Leviticus, who drew attention to God's holiness, for Matthew the Gospel writer, who emphasised God's goodness in his Sermon on the Mount, and today especially for Luke's insight into Jesus' heart where God's love and compassion ruled every thought and deed. May the Holy Spirit draw us into the same holiness, goodness and compassion this coming week and always.

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