
Love your Enemies

Luke 6.20-31

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 4, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

All Saints is a rather confusing date in the Church's calendar. It's confusing because the Church tends to give out confusing messages about what All Saints means. In some circles All Saints is a way of talking about the communion between the living and the dead. It's a way of celebrating that when we're in Christ we can be united with those believers that have gone before us in the faith. In other circles All Saints is a kind of Oscar ceremony, where we hand out prizes to those who have been outstanding examples in the faith, and we recall stories of those who have been tortured and martyred and in a myriad of other ways have qualified to be put in a stained glass window. This makes All Saints a kind of spectator sport, which has nothing much to do with us. So in modern times there has been what we might call a democratic reaction to such elitism, and an insistence that we all get to be saints. But this leaves us with a sneaking anxiety that we've been given the candy without eating the savory course first, so All Saints finally ends up becoming a pep rally where we hit each other's chests and pump iron and tell each other to be more muscular Christians than we were an hour ago.

If ever a problem were summed up in three words then the problem of All Saints would be summed up in these three words spoken by Jesus in today's gospel: "Love your enemies." On the face of it this is an absurd thing to say. Enemies are, practically by definition, people whom you can't love. If the command doesn't seem strange to us, perhaps we've lulled ourselves into a padded cocoon in which we've convinced ourselves we don't *have* enemies. In America this question has taken on a very particular shape in the last six years. On the one hand there are a lot of people who seem to think Americans *wouldn't* have any enemies if they stopped invading other countries and using up a disproportionate amount of the world's resources. On the other hand there are voices insisting that 9/11 showed America it has deep and profound enemies pretty much whatever it does, and those enemies can't be won over with kindness. Either way we can't really pretend, as we might have done ten years ago, that Americans don't have enemies. But does that mean we have enemies, you and I?

Jesus gives us a handy checklist of seven categories of enemy: those who hate you, curse you, abuse you, strike you, rob you, demand things from you, and steal from you. He makes it pretty hard to say we don't have enemies. I'm sure everyone here can think of people who have done these things to you.

Of course for some of us, the person who has done these things to us is pretty close to home. Some years ago a friend of mine prepared a family of three daughters for baptism. He spent a good deal of time with the family, looking at the shape of the Old Testament story, and how it was repeated in the new. The mother and her daughters started to renarrate their own stories in the light of what they were discovering. Eventually my friend asked the mother why it was she wanted something for her daughters she was not going to receive for herself. She said, "I think I might make this step one day, but not today." Two years after her daughters' baptism the mother came to see my friend again and said "Could you baptize the child of a neighbor of mine?" During the classes the mother said to my friend, "Is it ok if you baptize me this time too?" My friend raised an eyebrow, and said, "Do you mind me asking what's different from two years ago?" There was a long pause. "There was someone I couldn't forgive," she said. "And what's changed?" asked my friend. "He's died now," said the mother, with relief.

I think the story of this mother takes us near to the heart of Jesus' words in today's gospel. What this story shows us is the difference between what it means to love and what it means to forgive. The word "forgiveness" tends to be overused. It becomes discredited when it is used trivially – when for example a person has been subject to unimaginable horror and, rather than listen as they painstakingly recall each individual act of cruelty or violence or abuse, we simply wave them away and tell them to forgive. Even if we have had the grace to listen the person out – a process that may take years – I'm not sure forgiveness is something one can tell somebody else to do. Forgiveness comes when one is utterly fed up of being in the prison of hatred and anger and powerlessness, and reaches out for a greater story that puts the damage one has oneself suffered in the context of a great many other things that are wrong with the world. Forgiveness comes when one can't bear living any more in the story in which one is simply and only a victim – not because that story has stopped being true, but

because it no longer seems like the whole truth. The reason I'm not sure one can tell a friend to forgive is because if the story of hurt and pain *does* seem like that friend's whole story, that friend simply won't be able to hear what you are saying.

But notice when Jesus gives us a list of seven ways we should behave toward our enemies, forgiveness isn't one of them. He says do good to them, bless them, pray for them, offer the other cheek, give to them, let them take from you, do not ask for restitution. But he doesn't say "forgive." Why not? I think the answer is, because he is talking about hatred and abuse and violence *that is still going on*. To forgive something that is still going on is a kind of category mistake. Jesus gives us plenty of ways to respond and engage while the hostile and cruel and destructive actions are still going on. But forgiveness has to wait until the activity is over. You can't forgive something that is still going on, because that seems to be saying that what is going on is the whole story and therefore that it's somehow ok. This is the force, it seems to me, behind the mother in the baptism story saying about the person who had dominated her life and overshadowed her relationship with God, "He's died now." There are certain relationships in which trying to be nice about things and using the language of forgiveness prematurely can be a form of collusion, a way of denying what is really going on, a way of suppressing anger and deepening the cycle of despair. In some such relationships there is such a level of self-deception and compulsion and profound disorder that the hurt really is "going on" until the day one or other person dies. And the mother in the baptism story is saying she is discovering the astonishing, breathtaking resurrecting gift of forgiveness only now, now that that man who overshadowed her life is dead.

And we can have the same kind of reaction against people with whom we are at war. We defend our going to war because it seems there is no other way to express our profound and utter rejection of the atrocity the other side represents, most plausibly because we have been wantonly and willfully attacked and we feel the urgency of defending not just ourselves and our loved ones but everything our civilization represents. And it seems meaningless to forgive people who are, even as we speak, plotting and planning to kill if not us then people just like us if not here then in places just like here.

Jesus isn't asking us to forgive these people just now, because their hostility to us is still going on. Forgiveness may have to wait a little longer. But he *is* asking us to *love* these people. By recognizing that loving isn't the same as forgiving, we can give up on the anxiety that loving means condoning. Loving doesn't mean a kind of masochism that takes a perverse pleasure in being hurt and wounded, loving doesn't mean plotting to kill me is no problem. While I'm not sure you can tell someone to forgive, I do think you can tell someone to *love*. Sometimes when marriages get into trouble, one partner says to another, "I'm sorry, but the love just isn't there any more. I just don't feel it. Whatever we had, it's gone, and I've tried to bring it back, believe me I've tried, but I just can't." But love isn't just a feeling. Sometimes when our feelings are out of control, we have to fall back on something a bit more tangible. You can't be told to have a feeling, but you *can* learn to do tangible things.

I wonder if you remember the film "Fiddler on the Roof." Half way through discovering his daughters all seem to be passionately in love, Tevye suddenly wonders if he's missing out on something. He pursues his wife Golde around the house, asking, perhaps for the first time, "Do you love me?" She's as threatened by the question as he is. Eventually she turns to herself and says "For twenty-five years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his; if that's not love, what is?" Tevye asks one more time "Then... you love me?" and Golde accepts "I suppose I do." What they both discover is that love sometimes comes down to simple, faithful actions, especially when you're not sure you like what you're feeling.

So what does loving mean, in the face of hatred and hostility, if it doesn't mean being a doormat and it doesn't mean a warm feeling? It means carefully and doggedly, not passionately or sentimentally, following the words of Jesus and the seven actions he commends to us. First, "Do good to those who hate you." Say by your actions, "However much you hate me I will never hate you." Remember this will end. Don't let these people turn you into a monster. Repay evil with good. Second, "Bless those who hate you." Mind your speech. Try not to lose your temper. Think of those who are hating and hurting you and see them as tiny children they once were, longing for trust and safety, and speak to them as if they were still those children. Third, "Pray for those who abuse you." As I have said, sometimes abuse is incredibly difficult to become disentangled from. Remember God is always as much a part of any story as you are. In prayer, ask God to be made present not just to you but to your enemy. Fourth, "Offer the other cheek." In other words, not just don't get into a fight, because then there'll

be no difference between you and them, but don't let those who hate you think you can be intimidated by violence. Offering the other cheek means saying "I'm not going to accept that violence trumps everything else." Fifth, "Don't withhold your shirt." In other words, surprise your enemy with your generosity, and thus show your enemies you have not become like them. Sixth, "Give to everyone who begs." Remember that, even when you can only think of how you've been hurt, there is always someone worse off than you, and reaching out to them is a way of rescuing yourself from self-pity. And seventh, "Don't ask for your property back." I think this means remember you will lose everything when you die so start living toward your possessions in such a way that they don't determine who you are.

When we reach the end of this list we realize that what Jesus has just described is what is about to happen to him. Jesus went to the cross because he loved his enemies. As he went to the cross he was hated, he was cursed, he was abused, he was struck, he was stripped of his clothes and humiliated. And yet at every step he responded not with hatred but with love. And the people who did these things to him were people like us. And only when it was almost over, when he was nailed to the cross, did Jesus go beyond the discipline of love and make that last step, and finally say "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." Up to that point he had *loved* his enemies. When it was over he *forgave* them. And then, in the power of his resurrection, he showed us that evil will finally be overcome and that the long shadow of sin over our lives will finally be removed. In Jesus' resurrection, and only in Jesus' resurrection, God gave us the power to love.

So when Jesus is saying to us today "Love your enemies," he is saying "*You* have been my enemies, and I have loved *you*. Don't make me into a creature of your hatred, but let me make you into a witness of my love. Follow me to Jerusalem. Follow me to the cross." You may be here today at a defining moment in your life when you are surrounded by hatred and hurt and hostility and humiliation. Maybe you've tried to bury it and maybe it hasn't worked and maybe it's still tying you in knots. Maybe it's the right moment to ponder Jesus' words. Am I going to turn into the person who hates me, or am I going to learn what it really means to love? The saints are those who chose to learn what it really means to love.

Jesus walked the path to the cross alone. We don't. Unlike Jesus, we *don't* walk alone. When we walk through the storm we can hold our head high, and not be afraid. We can walk on, because we never walk alone. We are surrounded by the company of saints who have walked before us and now line every step of our way. We can walk the path Jesus walked because he has first walked it for us. Sometimes we can't find it in us to forgive. The saints are those who yet show us how still to love. Let's celebrate All Saints, as people who are trying to learn what love really means. Thank God that, with Christ and the saints, we never walk alone.