

HIW 15.06.2008

Romans 12, (14)-17-21

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I don't know what it is that makes some preachers convincing and others not. It may be that in some cases, the love of God and the experience of a close walk with Jesus Christ shines through the words, so that they convey the reality of personal knowledge. Others may simply have the gift of skilful oratory. How often do we know enough about a preacher, and about the depth of his or her faith, to know if the words really reflect a depth of conviction; or whether, even if the conviction is there, the person concerned succeeds in living it out? How often do we fail to "show forth in our lives what we believe in our hearts"! And so, faced with the challenges of the text from St. Paul that was read as the first reading and which you have in your leaflets, and the similar challenges of the Gospel text we have just heard, the poor preacher may feel like Belshazzar reading the writing on the wall: "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting"! Or I myself, attempting to preach on these texts, may well feel that whatever I may say about them, the only honest message that can come through will be: "Do as I say; don't do as I do!"

Because it is Doing that lies at the heart of this text. It is a thoroughly practical, down-to-earth text. It is not in the least theoretical, far removed from the kind of complicated theological argument that we often associate with St. Paul, and which makes the hearts of so many ordinary churchgoers sink when they see on their service sheets that there is to be a reading from one of his epistles. If, as I read this passage in my Bible, I allow my eyes to wander no further than the top of the same page, I find Paul in the middle of a complex

exposition of the relationship between the Old and the New Covenants, and whether the acceptance of Jesus by non-Jews – he is after all writing to the Christians in Rome – means that God has rejected his chosen people Israel. And I read sentences like this one:

"Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you."

I am sure you all understood that perfectly, but I am glad no-one has asked me to preach about it. Then rather "If your enemy is hungry, feed him," however difficult it may be to live up to.

What I am trying to say is that there are few passages in St. Paul's letters that give one the feeling as directly as this one does that Jesus is speaking through him. St. Paul has often enough been accused of obscuring the direct message of Christ with his complex theological structures, and it is easy to point out that unlike the other Apostles, he had not walked through the fields of Galilee or the streets of Jerusalem, hearing the Master's words from his own lips. Paul himself would certainly deny any deficit in this respect; even though he calls himself "the least of the Apostles, because I persecuted the Church of God", he does not allow that to diminish his claim to apostleship, but makes it clear that he feels his own experience of the risen Lord to be quite on a par with that of Peter or James or John. And at this point he makes it easy for us to accept that claim: these do indeed sound like the words of one who had heard the Sermon on the Mount with his own ears.

Indeed, what St. Paul says in this passage is so close in spirit to the Sermon on the Mount that I will be including quite a number of quotations from that key text in what follows, assuming it is well enough known for you to recognise my references.

The Sermon on the Mount is a wide-ranging compendium of Jesus' teachings, but much of its content can be summarised under two aspects. On the one hand, Jesus tells us what we should be like – the salt of the earth, the light of the world; like the lilies of the field or the birds of the air. And on the other hand, he

tells us what we should do or not do. We should not swear oaths, we should not lust after other people's wives (or, presumably, husbands), we should not give way to anger or insult other people by calling them fools, but we should turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to those who seek to take from us, love our enemies.

Can we do it?

With regard to the commandment to love, I always have to think of the words of a clergyman whose ministry in Oxford when I was a student played a large part in bringing me and many others to Christ. His name was Keith de Berry; I don't suppose any of you have heard of him, but I would like to pay him the homage of mentioning him by name. I remember him saying in one of our discussion circles: "People sometimes ask me: 'How can I be sure that I love God?' I always reply: 'If you want to know whether you love God, think to yourself: If I loved God, what would I do? Then go and do it.'" Or as Jesus said at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Go and do likewise".

In the modern world, we have got used to – or we have been pushed by the pop music industry into – equating "loving" with "being in love" – emotion in the realm of romance and sexuality, butterflies in the stomach, violins in the sky and everything immersed in a rosy glow. When I was studying medieval literature my teacher maintained that romantic love was an invention of the medieval troubadours and minnesingers, and that we wouldn't fall in love at all if we hadn't been brought up on a diet of love songs, love stories and love poetry. I was never quite convinced by that; but I am nevertheless quite sure that when Jesus told us to love our enemies, he did not mean that we should have the same feelings for them as we have for our spouses or our children. The important thing is not how we feel, but how we act; the message is precisely that we should not treat those for whom we do not feel such positive emotions differently from those for whom we do. From the Sermon on the Mount again: "If you love those who love you – do not even the tax collectors do that? If you greet only your brothers – do not even the pagans do that?"

Jesus told us to love our enemies, and he told us to love our neighbours – and in fact that often comes down to much the same thing, as many people with difficult neighbours will be able to testify. Perhaps it was people like that that Paul was thinking of when he wrote "If it is possible, as far as depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Because while some of his remarks - "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse"; "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" – relate to how we should deal with people who might be described as our enemies, other exhortations directly alongside them - "Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Live in peace with everyone" - do not seem to refer to enemies, but simply tell us how we should relate and respond to those who surround us every day – as neighbours in the narrower sense, as colleagues at work, as fellow participants in whatever activities we are involved in, as people we simply come across in shops, in the street, or in the traffic.

If we think again of the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see that there too, loving your neighbour and loving your enemy in fact come down to the same thing. Jesus told the story in response to the question "Who is my neighbour?" And the answer is: since I am commanded to love my neighbour, my neighbour is anyone I come across who needs my love – who needs my help. To the Samaritan, the injured man was a stranger. He had never met him before, did not even know who he was. But quite by chance he came upon him in need, and showed his love for his fellow man by caring for him. He did not need to feel romantic emotion towards the stranger: he simply did what needed to be done. And – which is the point of the story as Jesus tells it – the man to whom he became a loving neighbour was also an enemy. The injured man was a Jew, his "neighbour" a Samaritan, one with whom, as St. John tells us, "the Jews did not associate". Despite this, the enemy in need becomes a neighbour, and love is shown in actions, not feelings.

However, I should not exaggerate. My neighbour is the one who needs my help; but my enemy is the one who does me harm, or "does evil", as Paul says;

the one who persecutes me, the one who strikes me on the right cheek, the one who seeks to take away my coat. To feed him when he is hungry is one thing; to turn the other cheek, or to give my cloak as well, is another.

Can we do it? That is such a personal matter that I hardly think it is possible to give a general answer. One of us may be able to, the other not. But what is clear to me is: Jesus thinks we can. And should. And he said: "If you love me, you will obey what I command." Those who love, do.

Now it is possible in many ways to rationalise turning the other cheek, or, to return to our text from St. Paul, blessing those who persecute you, in terms of its practical effects and benefits. Hitting back at those who hit you, cursing those who curse you, perpetuates a quarrel, allows it to escalate, and increases the quantity of un-peace in our world. Refusing to be provoked or to retaliate, on the other hand, increases the sum total of peace in the world, breaks through the circle of violence and hatred. It is not for nothing that we speak of a "disarming smile", which especially in the eyes of a child can – or ought to – shame adults into abandoning their petty quarrels, but which also between adults can defuse evil intentions.

All of which is doubtless a very good thing; but my feeling nevertheless is that it is not really what Jesus, and Paul, mean. If they had done, they would have said it. Jesus does not say that if we follow his commandments we will promote peace in the world. What he does say is that we should follow his commandments because that is the right way to live. Because that is what is pleasing to God. Because if we don't, we are no better than the pagans or the wicked tax-collectors; whereas our ambition should be to be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect. Because if we act as he tells us to, we will be laying up treasures in heaven. Goodness is right in itself; those who repay evil with evil, as Paul says, are allowing themselves to be overcome by evil. The proverb tells us "Revenge is sweet"; but is it really? It may feel so in the first moment of triumph; but afterwards, when our emotions have settled, do we really feel the better for it, or do we not rather have a feeling of having been sullied, dirtied, ourselves infected

by the evil originally been done to us? Particularly if as Christians we are accustomed to placing our actions before the Lord in prayer, we are almost sure to feel so. Whereas those who repay evil with good ward off the evil, preserve their own integrity and goodness; and goodness is right in itself.

In this context, Paul's addition that by repaying evil with good we will "heap burning coals" on our enemy's head may well make us feel uncomfortable, and the fact that he did not invent this passage himself, but is quoting from the Book of Proverbs, does little to reduce our discomfort. What is he trying to say? That revenge is indeed sweet, but that we can revenge ourselves in a more subtle way than by hitting back at those who hit us, or by cursing those who curse us? That we can do our enemy more harm by kindness than by resistance, and so may well feel self-satisfied, even smug, at achieving this? That sounds very un-Jesus-like; there must surely be another way of looking at it. Remember that we are not talking only about preserving ourselves from evil, but about overcoming evil with good, which implies that the evil in the other must somehow be destroyed. If by our good deeds we can burn away the evil in the other and so bring about the purging and cleansing of our opponent, then we have done him good as well as ourselves.

But our texts give us a further and deeper reason for refraining from repaying evil with evil, for meeting evil with good. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." If we set out to punish those who do us wrong, we are setting ourselves up as being better than them, as being in the right. But who of us is without sin, and has the right to cast the first stone? Or as St. Paul writes earlier in the same Letter to the Romans, "All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God." Any righteousness that we may have, and which we may feel sets us apart from murderers, thieves and adulterers, not to mention tax collectors, pales into insignificance when set against the gulf between our sinfulness and the glory and holiness of God. We all have planks in our eyes. We are all blind, yet we persist in attempting to lead the blind. We all deserve judgment;

yet if we acknowledge that much, we may all hope for mercy. "Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath; for it is written: It is mine to avenge." It is simply not our place, it is not within our competence, it is usurping God's authority, for us to suppose we know the answer to the question of evil.

Now in saying this, I am in no way calling into question our system of law and order and the need for police, criminal courts and prisons. Helmut Schmidt is supposed to have said that one cannot govern according to the Sermon on the Mount; there are many who disagree with him, but for my part I would agree, and my reasoning is quite simple. Jesus says to me: "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Nowhere does Jesus tell me what to do if someone strikes my neighbour on the cheek and he calls out to me for help. I have often felt the need for a version of the parable of the good Samaritan in which the Samaritan arrives earlier, namely just as the traveller is being attacked by the thieves; I find it difficult to accept that loving my enemy means allowing him to beat up my neighbour without me, or the police, trying to stop him, by force if necessary. But whether or not one is prepared to admit a political or public dimension to Christ's teachings, it seems to me indisputable that in our own personal and private conduct, we are called upon to apply them.

I hope you will forgive me if I nevertheless avoid the question of how well I myself live up to the demands that our Lord and St. Paul make of us in this respect, and the extent to which I myself feel capable of turning the other cheek and of repaying evil with good. But I repeat: that is what Jesus requires of us. He demands that we love, and that we show our love in deeds. So don't do as I do: Do as *He* says.