

Sermon: Loving our neighbour, loving our enemy.

Reading: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7 and Matthew 5: 38-48

I must admit I don't remember many sermons, but I often remember a good sermon illustration. Many years ago I listened to a preacher introduce today's reading with the following true and personal story. I call it the 'cat poo story'.

If you have ever had a next-door neighbour you will know that all sorts of things can cause neighbourhood disputes, kids being noisy, trees dropping leaves into your pool, fences falling apart, barking dogs and of course the unpleasantness of the neighbour's cat doing its business in your rose garden. These things may seem minor offences, but they can lead to some very hateful situations.

The minister who told the cat poo story was very honest about their feelings towards the neighbour and their cat, however being a good Christian they put up with constantly digging into smelly little surprises in their garden. Eventually it became too much, and the minister decided to carefully dig the stinking parcel up each day and toss them back over the fence. Not very loving, but effective in dealing with the problem. This continued for some time and the minister felt no remorse until one fateful day. Climbing up onto a step to make sure the neighbours were inside, the minister reached up and tossed the cat poo over the fence and all was well, except for on that day an unusually strong gust of wind caught the poo missile and blew it straight back into their face. The minister decided then and there that this unfortunate event was like God sending them a message on what it truly means to love your neighbour. Being unloving can come back to bite us or in the case of this morning's illustration slap you in the face.

It is so easy to be hateful, have someone abuse you in traffic and what is our automatic response? It seems to be hardwired in our nature to react to nastiness with nastiness, to pay back an offense with an offense. We looked at a perfect example of this last week in Psalm 137. For those of you who weren't here, this Psalm is a lament of the Israelites, grieving over being sent into exile in Babylon. It ends with a terrible, reactive wish for vengeance and extreme violence against the innocent children of their Babylonian enemies.

This week in Jeremiah, the prophet tells the people that God wants them to get on with their lives in exile. They are told to settle down, to build homes and raise families. God knows they will be there for the long haul, seventy years in fact, so the time for clinging to past grievances is over. Despite the Babylonians being enemy number one, God goes even further to say that they must act for the common good of all people within their neighbourhood, praying for peace and prosperity for all citizens including the Babylonians. That's a huge shift of attitude, the people are encouraged to move on from vengeance and pray for peace instead. Both these ancient people of God and us, the modern-day church, are called to live and act as if the peaceful kingdom is a reality here and now.

Perhaps as we become more loving as God is loving, Isaiah's vision of the peaceful kingdom will become a reality.

God's instruction to get on with it, to get on with living and acting for peace reminds me of an old saying someone reminded me of during the week.

"I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being; let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again." Etienne de Grellet

<https://www.passiton.com/inspirational-quotes/3290-i-shall-pass-this-way-but-once-any-good-that-i>

But how do we love our neighbours, even the annoying ones with straying cats and then rise to the challenge of loving our enemies as Jesus instructs us? This seems to go against our very nature, it doesn't make sense; so is it a stretch too far on Jesus' part?

It is only when we recall that God is love that we begin to understand that to love and pray for an enemy requires the presence of God within us. This was clear in the reading we heard last week from 1 John. We heard that God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.

Jesus explains the indwelling of God within us as the end goal of life, to become as loving as God is loving. We know that we can never be perfect as God is perfect and so the last line of today's reading needs some unpacking, Jesus concludes his instruction to love our enemies by telling us to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That reads well in modern English, but we lose Jesus' intention in the translation. Biblical commentators tell us that the original word translated by us as 'perfect' was *telos*. *Telos* was not about reaching moral perfection, rather it "meant reaching one's intended outcome. For example the telos of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The telos of a peach tree is to yield peaches. Which means that we might translate this passage more loosely to mean, "Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be."¹

Would that look like the Peaceful Kingdom I wonder?

Even more loosely, worthy of a fridge magnet, slogan, or motto we could sum that as, 'Be loving as God is loving'. This is God's intention for all of us, the masterplan to bring about the peaceful kingdom.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-7-a-telos/>