

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

24.02.2019
By Pat Bennett

Introduction

Today's reading contains possibly some of the most contentious and debated commands of Jesus: Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you! Pray for your abusers! Turn the other cheek! These are all things that may seem difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. But the Lucan Jesus also offers us the key to understanding these and thus a starting point from which we can begin to work out what they might mean for us in our own particular situations.

Preparation: Think about how you understand the words 'mercy' and 'compassion' by using them as the basis for an acrostic 'poem'. To do this take a blank sheet of paper and write each word down the long edge. Now use each of the letters to begin another word or a short phrase which describes or expresses something of what each word means to you (n.b these lines don't need to rhyme!)

Text

Luke 6:27-38

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love

those who love them.

If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Comment

Today's gospel passage is the second from a lengthy discourse which Jesus directs initially at his disciples (see [Epiphany 6](#)) but then widens out (“I say to those that listen”) to include the surrounding crowd who have gathered to hear him. There are strong parallels between this ‘Sermon on the Plain’ and the opening section of the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ recorded by Matthew (Mt 5: 1–12). However while Matthew's articulation is couched in somewhat abstract and ‘spiritual’ language, Luke is very much more concrete: one has a sense that the Evangelist is offering very context – specific examples to his hearers in order to help them understand how the rule of the Kingdom of Heaven, which he is in the process of unfolding for them, is to be followed in their own particular circumstances. Thus the first 4 verses of the passage not only suggest an underlying situation of conflict but also a milieu marked by poverty, and exploitation. The Lucan Jesus gives some ‘case-study’ examples showing how those living as part of God's kingdom are to respond to these prevailing circumstances in ways consonant with its ethic, and from which those hearing (then and now!) can also work out how to respond in other situations.

But along with the worked examples, Jesus also points his listeners towards the touchstone at the heart of the Kingdom against which all potential responses can be evaluated: “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*” Mercy, as the Old Testament not infrequently reminds us, is a cardinal attribute of God – and moreover one which has nothing of the hard legalistic quality with which we sometimes imbue it. As Portia observes in her eloquent and iconic speech in Shakespeare's ‘The Merchant of Venice’ “*the quality of mercy is not strained/It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven*”. There is nothing constrained about God's mercy – it is as inevitable and natural as falling rain, an overflow from God's essential nature and thus inseparable from his love. Love for our enemies is deeply rooted in the quality of mercy.

Oiktirm n – the adjective used by Luke is perhaps the strongest of the three for

merciful which occur in the NT and has its roots in the verb *oiktir* – to have compassion on. Its only other occurrence is in James 5:11 where it appears as a description of God and is further reinforced and intensified by its coupling with a second adjective *polysplagchnos* (full of pity), which in turn is rooted in *splagchnon* – the Greek word for ‘bowels’ (hence the old fashioned phrase ‘the bowels of mercy’). So what Jesus is pointing towards here is not some cold, legalistic sense of forgiveness coming from a place of power, but an active compassion flowing from a place of love – something which one feels, deep within oneself, *for* and *with* the Other. Compassion moreover is often inseparable from a desire to understand the situation of/relieve the suffering of the Other who has excited the emotion.

This then is the attitude which should underlie all our responses to the other, even – perhaps especially – when we are involved in situations of difficulty or conflict with them. The specifics may vary according to our situation but the underlying principle and its questions remain the same as for Luke’s audience: am I prepared to meet the other with a fresh spirit and an open heart – holding their humanity dear, sensitive to their difficulties, anxieties or pain? Am I willing to look beyond the given or entrenched narratives for fresh insight and understanding which might help in the processes of healing and restoration?

This may feel like a risky business – just as some of the examples cited by Luke must have seemed perilous to his listeners – but its potential is clearly indicated in the closing verse of the passage. Perhaps we will not ‘get back’ directly from the person with whom we are engaging, but when the compassionate kindness of mercy is put into the system, there will be an overflow somewhere.

Response

Go back to your acrostic poem and look at the words or phrases you have used to describe the nature of mercy and compassion. Is there anything you want to change or alter – perhaps make stronger? What can you do to help nurture these attributes in your own life so that they become the soil out of which responses can spring in situations of conflict, or the deep wells from which compassion and mercy for the Other can overflow?

Prayer

Here as we gather, greeting this day’s gladness,
we call to mind the love that sets us free:
faithfully sharing all our joy and sadness,
God’s love reveals how love is meant to be.

So may love shape and shine through all our living,
temper our actions, fill and warm our speech,
make us in all things patient and forgiving –
kindness and caring always in our reach.

In all decisions may love guide our choices,
show us the way to peace instead of strife,
help us to silence selfish, grudging voices,
lead us to live a generous open life.

Then through the years may love grow ever brighter,

nurture and keep us, always guide us home;
heighten each joy, make every burden lighter –
wellspring of grace, where hope and strength are known.

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Tune: Lord of the Years

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Conflict Skills