

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

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Introduction

The ostensive meaning of today's text seems to relate to setting behavioural rules. And while the examples are mostly very historical/cultural context-specific, we can take them as a basis for reflecting on how we should respond to others in situations of conflict, especially against the touchstone of mercy which the passage highlights (see more on this in a [previous reflection on this text](#)).

However, if we examine the text using some insights from literary analysis, another perspective opens up and we can see the words of Jesus as offering a profound challenge to the hidden systems underpinning behavioural expectation. This too can provide a useful lens for examining the dynamics and dimensions of conflict and our roles in it.

Preparation: Recall an experience – either positive or negative – when someone did not behave towards you in the way in which you expected. How did you feel? What sorts of expectations about behavioural 'rules' or conventions were involved? Were any of these reinforced, challenged or completely overturned by what happened?

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”

Comment

Luke, like the other evangelists, uses language in a variety of different ways to help in his unfolding of the story of Jesus and the message delivered through his life and teaching. However, our tendency to assume that the world of the biblical writers mirrors our own, or to retroject particular theological assumptions into the text, can sometimes blind us to these rhetorical devices and thus to important elements in the text associated with them.

In today's passage, we encounter some forceful, unsettling language used in combination with what biblical scholar Robert Tannehill calls 'focal instances'^[1]. These are sayings of Jesus beginning with an 'if' or 'whoever' clause which appear at first sight to be stating a casuistic law (if..then...) and setting a behavioural rule. However, the example which then follows is **so** specific that it does not provide a useful general rule when confined to its literal sense – we know what to do if someone slaps our cheek, but what do we do if they strike us elsewhere? In these instances, the example performs a different function: its *specificity* highlights the *extremity* of the command; and it is this extremity which provides the shock jolt because it is so much at variance with the way people would normally behave in such a situation. The command thus generates a tension, not just with the expected behaviour in a specific situation, but with very patterns of behaviour which govern society. The effect is to direct the hearer's attention beyond the literal meaning of the words, and to encourage them to reflect on the hidden modes which underpin

them.

So what is the underlying assumption being challenged here? It's helpful to remind ourselves again at this point that the biblical texts speak to and from a world which is very different from our own in many respects. In the life world of Jesus and his hearers, social relationships were governed by the principle of reciprocity, and the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary was one of reciprocal obligation. The benefaction was regarded as a loan and thus repayment of some kind was expected; this in turn dictated to whom one might offer help: good deeds were done to those who had done good to you, or from whom you could reasonably expect good deeds in return^[2]. The reverse side of the coin – that wrong is repaid in a similar way – is also exposed here, though slightly less directly than in Matthew's 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' (Mt 5:38).

By using extreme examples, Jesus lays bare the system of reciprocity which underpins the normal everyday life of his listeners and goes on to declare it inadequate for human flourishing and unworthy of God, whose very being is generosity. 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' is not a re-affirmation of the tacitly accepted norm of transactional reciprocity, but a challenge to rethink it within a very different framework, and then act accordingly in one's relationships with others.

[1] Robert C. Tannehill, *The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007) p 8-10

[2] Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002) p77

Response

Both the underlying theme of the text and the way the text itself operates to make this visible can provide entrance points for us as we reflect on conflict and our own involvements in it.

The former once again points us towards the fact that the ways in which people behave in conflict situations can often be a function of unseen or unappreciated elements of that particular conflict system – unspoken rules or expectations about behaviour or response, particular narratives and understandings about history or identity etc. Deepening our understanding of these structural elements can pave the way to more constructive ways of responding and engaging. If you're currently involved in a situation of conflict, how much do you know about the different elements which have shaped (or are currently shaping) it – on either side of the issue? How could you find out more about these? Who might help you with that?

Secondly, the manner in which the Lucan Jesus uses language in a very particular way to prosecute a specific agenda can also be a useful reminder. In any conflict situation, we always need to be attentive to the statements, comments, questions and challenges which form part of its discourse, both public and private. How are these being used – and how are we ourselves using them – to drive a conflict system, whether that be towards escalation or resolution? How can we develop our critical faculties in this respect? Who or what might help us to do that?

Prayer

Jesus,
you used words so skillfully
to expose hidden patterns
challenge their values
and to offer instead
the different patterns and values
of your Kingdom.

Help us
to listen with attention
and speak with skill
in whatever situation
we find ourselves
so that we too
may reflect and reveal
the patterns and values
of your Kingdom.
Amen

Further Reading

Now available via the [Resources](#) section of the website: recordings of Pádraig Ó Tuama's Advent conversations with contributors to the [Spirituality of Conflict](#) book.

'what were you arguing about along the way?' is a newly revised and edited collection of Spirituality of Conflict entries for years A, B and C. This volume contains introductions, reflections, responses and prayers for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter.

Pat Bennett, the theologian, scientist and liturgist (and part of the Spirituality of Conflict team since it began) has spent hundreds of hours reading through the entries, selecting and editing those entries that work well together, and compiling them together in a volume of resources that is rich with support for everyone, whether using it in preparation for preaching, or for personal or group learning. You can get it from all good bookshops, or online venues. If you can order directly from [Canterbury Press](#), or through your local bookshop, we'd be extra pleased!