

Views from the Pews: Loving our enemies

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. . . . ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? *Matt 5: 38-46.*

The rule of ‘an eye for an eye’ was originally a way of limiting retaliation to proportionate justice, outlawing any excessive response intended to deter further attacks. But, as the saying goes, if everyone practised it, the whole world would be blind. Forgiveness is much more difficult, but works better to achieve peace in the long run.

Loving our enemies doesn’t in fact mean we have to *like* them, only that we refuse to do them harm. The only way to stop a fight is to remove all reasons for further interaction. And in fact, some of the most astonishing examples of defusion of conflict have come from visionary leaders who overcame their natural responses to injury and injustice with love and compassion. Think Ghandi, Tutu, and Parihaka. At the trial of Brenton Tarrant, watch the healing, calm acceptance of Farid Ahmed contrasted with the angry rejection expressed by Maysoon Salama (“I will *never* forgive you!”). The example of Farid’s forgiveness despite unimaginable pain has been a worldwide inspiration; lack of it among others guarantees ongoing anger and resentment.

There is an even more important reason why we should steel ourselves love our enemies, one that has lost its immediate impact because the words are so familiar. In Mathew 6: 9-13, the only petition in the Lord’s prayer that has a condition attached is, ‘And forgive us our trespasses, as we have forgiven those who trespass against us’. Jesus adds a terrifying note in verses 14-15:

‘For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; **but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses**’.

Which of us dare take that risk?

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