

**Love Your Enemies (Luke 6. 27-31)**

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‘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’. (Luke 6. 27-28). These words are shocking at the best of times. But to hear them in a time of war, in the face of tyranny, atrocity and systemic persecution, seems almost unbearable. They seem a betrayal of the very possibility of justice and self-respect; they seem a God-given licence for the tyrants and murderers of this world to act beyond restraint, undeterred by resistance or even the attempt at self-defence. ‘Love your enemies’, Jesus says. But in times of war or tyranny, what can this mean in practice apart from quiescence, occupation, defeat?

Everything hinges, I think, on what we mean by love. What is the love with which we’re to love our enemies? What does love look like in a time such as this? As I’ve sat with this question, I seem to discern five aspects.

To begin, I think, it looks like heart-break. When Jesus confronted the murderous enmity of his own city, his coming rejection by its people, he wept: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ Jesus laments for himself, realising what Jerusalem’s enmity will mean for him. He laments for them. He sees their entrapment in the futility of fear, falsehood and hatred. In Matthew’s gospel, he foresees the destruction to which their entrapment must lead: ‘See, your house is left to you, desolate’ (Matt. 23. 37-38).

In Luke’s version of this story, Jesus addresses the city itself: ‘If you ... had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes’. And the consequence of their blindness will be disaster,

perhaps not immediately but nevertheless inevitably: 'Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side'. No life, no city, no community or nation can be sustained indefinitely on the back of violence and injustice. Jesus recognises this truth even as he's about to become its victim. Yet he speaks not in the key of revenge but of compassion. 'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do'.

Which does not mean he lets them off the hook. Immediately prior to commanding his disciples to 'Love your enemies', Jesus denounces those who live without regard for others. 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry' (Luke 6.24-25). Woe to you who you live as if your fate is not bound to the fate of all. And this brings me to discern a second aspect of love a time of war. Truthfulness.

Recently I listened to an inspiring and harrowing address by Oleksandra Matviichuk, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize and head of Ukraine's Center for Civil Liberties. She was talking about her work documenting the appalling atrocities committed by Russian forces in this war, of her determination that every violation of human dignity and human rights should be acknowledged and the perpetrators held to account. In a culture of impunity, she said, everyone is dehumanised; not only victims who are treated as if the destruction of their bodies, minds and lives counts for nothing, but also perpetrators. Because unless those who have done evil are brought to realise what they have done, to know the enormity of what it means to violate another, then they remain forever alienated from their own humanity, forever cut off from the whole.

Theologian Rowan Williams has said that the love of God is not the 'bland legitimisation of all we do and are'. It can require a painful and costly process of facing the truth of ourselves and our actions, and turning from our destructive ways. Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita writes, if someone who has done evil is 'the beneficiary of a saint's love', it is 'a severe love'. This is because 'it [does]

not count as love unless it [is] lucid about the evil of [the person's] crimes ... and about [their] failures to be remorseful for them'. Truthfulness, even judgement, is an aspect of love. But this is a judgement that comes not to condemn but to save. The light of truth shines from the eyes of a saint, not to destroy the evil-doer, but in hope of their restoration, that they might 'turn from their ways and live' (Ezekiel 18.23).

And yet to hold open this space of compassionate clear-sightedness, this desire that the wicked should turn and live, especially when we have suffered directly at their hands, is intensely painful. At times, it may feel practically impossible. There have certainly been seasons in my life when I have cursed rather than blessed those who've hurt me; hated rather than prayed for those who've abused me. And I've not suffered war and atrocity. What then is this love that is capable of desiring the restoration of our enemies? How may we truly come to want their good?

In the Christian vision, the great symbol, the great source, of this quality of love is the Cross. The love with which we are called to love our enemies is cruciform. It involves being willing to suffer for the sake of love itself. Not to achieve an outcome, to attain a goal or a guarantee of anything in return, but solely that we might keep loving. In practice, this requires us to absorb the pain of our heartbreak, the pain of a broken world, without lashing out towards others, without seeking to alleviate our agony by paying it forward and increasing hurt and hate. This 'absorption method' is what Jesus is teaching, I think, when he says: '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'.

Jesus is here not forbidding all self-defence, nor asking that we roll over passively in the face of injustice, simply letting ourselves be destroyed. In a way, it's precisely the opposite. At the level of our being, turning the other cheek means not letting ourselves be determined by what is done to us. Jesus is saying,

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<sup>1</sup> Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2004), p.xxx.

do not allow yourselves to be turned into a reactivity; retain your freedom to choose to be differently from those who persecute you. Discern your response from there.

Well, in theory, perhaps, we get it; we know it. But in practice, this absorption method, this refusal to repay evil for evil, is indeed excruciating. Simone Weil wrote: 'He whose soul remains ever turned toward God though the nail pierces it, finds himself nailed to the very center of the universe. This is the true center; it is not in the middle; it is beyond space and time; it is God'.<sup>2</sup> And Jesus reveals that it's as we're nailed to this center that the life of God grows in us and begins to flow through us. 'In a dimension that does not belong to space, that is not time, that is indeed quite a different dimension', says Weil, the soul becomes rooted and grounded in God. Crucified love breaks through to the realm of grace. Here we discover that, against all reason and expectation, beyond the zero-sum playbook of win-lose and tit-for-tat, reprisal and revenge, is a givenness and a freedom to be that none of us generates or merits, but into which all of us are invited.

Polish poet Adam Zagajewski touched on the necessity of making contact with this realm of grace in the struggle against the Soviet regime. He pointed to the abiding significance of poetry and art for helping us remember the larger life for which we are made and for the sake of which we struggle.<sup>3</sup> From a contemplative perspective, the practice of meditation is another access to this dimension. Like poetry, like art, like play, meditation makes present the abiding reality of gratuitous love. In the gospels, it's from his realisation of union with this love that Jesus could return to those who were his enemies, breathing forgiveness and empowering them to create a new fellowship with God and with each other, a new world.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction' in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p.135.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Maria Tumarkin, *Axiomatic*, accessed <http://www.mariatumarkin.com/axiomatic>

But none of this is possible for us in isolation and in our own strength. And this brings me to a final aspect of love in a time like this – community. Love is not a matter of retreating into some private spiritual seclusion, seeking God apart from the pain of the world. It's necessarily a public and political act. Love forges communities that witness to an alternate reality than the violent, vengeful, merciless reality the tyrant wants us to believe is the only one possible. To keep loving in such a time requires us to be connected to others who can help sustain our trust in goodness, give us courage to speak, resist and act, who can hold us when we weep and tend us when we're wounded. These are the communities needed to help inoculate every society against infection by the would-be dictators, war-mongers and propagandists whose power relies on turning us against each other, making us enemies when we could be friends.

So heart-break, truthfulness, suffering, grace and community – ultimately the love with which we are called to love, the love that heals the world, is the same love with which God loves us. We're all conscious that, since the result of the US election this week, the rhetoric – the enactment – of violence is in some quarters more emboldened than ever. We do not know what is to come. Yet – love your enemies, Jesus says. Do good to those who hate you. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6.36). May God help us to be as we are called to be.