

CAN THERE BE A BETTER WORLD?¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, 19 February 2017**

Over the last few weeks, we have been making our way through the Sermon on the Mount. We've heard some strange and possibly unacceptable things. I expect that none of us will pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands in any literal sense, as we heard last week. We may have found Jesus' words about adultery difficult. In the first place, he addresses only men. In the second place, the institution of marriage has changed significantly since those days and we apparently allow divorce where Jesus does not. Father Spooner raised last week the question of whether or not we should take the statements that Jesus makes literally. In many cases it may be difficult for us not to reject the literal interpretation, given the changes in our circumstances. But, if we do, we may find ourselves ignoring the words altogether. So, we need to take another look at what Jesus is doing and find a middle way.

In the second part of chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives six examples of the kind of life that God's kingdom requires. Each of these examples is marked by the phrases, "you have heard it said", and, "but I say to you". Sometimes Jesus replaces what has gone before, in others he extends it. We heard four of them last week.² They were:

- On Anger and Relationships
- On Adultery and Male Lust
- On Divorce and Male Mistreatment of Women
- On Integrity of Word and Action

This week's remaining two are:

- On Non-Violent Resistance to Evil
- On Love for Enemies

If we are to understand these examples properly, we will need to place them in their proper context. We begin this morning with a quote that appears more than once in Hebrew law, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth".³ We are inclined to view this statement with some fear. We hear it today most frequently from those demanding vengeance and harsh punishment of offenders. In its original location, however, it was restrictive rather than permissive. The behaviour to be restricted was the blood feud in which retaliation went on with increasing frequency and violence, leading possibly to the annihilation of whole families.⁴ The restriction was to limit punishment to a single event and to a similar kind of hurt.

Vengeance and revenge are very dangerous activities, ones in which we suffer more than those we pursue. Sir Francis Bacon said, in the late 16th century, when writing about revenge:

¹ Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; Matthew 5:38-48

² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, New York, Orbis Books, 2003, pp. 143-157

³ Exodus 21:24; Deuteronomy 19:21; Leviticus 24:20

⁴ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972, p. 127

Cosmus, duke of Florence, had a desperate saying against perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable; You shall read (saith he) that we are commanded to forgive our enemies; but you never read, that we are commanded to forgive our friends. ... This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal, and do well.⁵

The next thing to note is that Jesus is speaking in the midst of the hostile occupation of the land by the Roman oppressors. Jesus offers further restrictions for situations in which we are confronted by opposition. These are the situations that usually bring out the worst in us. Lest we dismiss these sayings as too onerous for us, we need to understand the context in which they are set. The best clue is in the phrase “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile”. This refers to the right of the Roman occupiers of Palestine to conscript labour at will. We might easily miss this but, be assured, the original hearers would not have done so. Jesus is advocating non-violent resistance to oppression of the kind espoused by Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

We could be a little misled by the translation that we are using here. Our text says, “Do not resist an evildoer”. This is a little strange, since earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, we are enjoined to resist evil, which Jesus did when tempted and which would be impossible if we did not also resist the evildoer. It would seem from this translation that we are not even to protect ourselves, a very difficult interpretation for us today on the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin in the Second World War. New Testament scholar, Warren Carter, suggests that the translation underestimates the meaning of the Greek word used here.⁶ He argues that it refers to “armed resistance in military encounters” or “violent struggle”. He says that the question is not whether evil should be resisted, but how that resistance is to take place.

Jesus explicitly rejects the eye for an eye rule and replaces it with a non-violent one. Even so, we will find his words difficult. René Girard says that we habitually mistake the nature of the violence that is so much a part of our lives. He said:

People imagine either that violence is no more than a kind of parasite, which the appropriate safeguards can easily eliminate or that it is an ineradicable trait of human nature, an instinct or fatal tendency that it is fruitless to fight.

People imagine that to escape from violence it is sufficient to give up any kind of violent initiative, but ... no one in fact thinks of himself as taking this initiative [because the] ... first violence ... is always perceived as originating with the opponent Violence is always perceived as being a legitimate reprisal or even self-defence.⁷

We can see how this works out in practice if we take the words about turning the other cheek. The scene here is one that the hearers would have recognised. This is not, as we might imagine, a punch that is intended to initiate a fight. This is an open-handed slap, an insulting gesture from a superior to an inferior. It is intended to humiliate and the recipient is expected to remain submissive.

What alternatives does the person have? The first is to do the expected and submit. Another alternative is to strike back, an action that continues the cycle of violence. Jesus suggests that

⁵ Francis Bacon (1561-1626), *Of Revenge*, <http://www.authorama.com/essays-of-francis-bacon-5.html>

⁶ Carter, p. 151

⁷ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1978, pp. 197-98

the recipient turn the other cheek, an action that is not, as we might have thought, weak. This action is profoundly subversive and revolutionary. By turning the other cheek, the person refuses to submit and asserts their own dignity. It denies the superior the power to humiliate.⁸

Take also the command to give your cloak to one who demands your coat. This example is set in the context of a person being sued for debt. Poor Palestinians were frequently in oppressive debt to landlords and others. Here the person is being sued literally for the shirt off his back in order to repay a debt. It is not as though such persons had a lot of clothes. Usually, such a person wore two garments, one outer garment and one under garment. The creditor wants the outer garment and Jesus says, “Surrender the under garment as well.” Thus, the person stands naked in the court. Why? Because this action shames the creditor, unmasking the heartlessness of the system and gives at least some power into the hands of the underdog.⁹

Similarly, going the second mile subverts the power of the Roman soldier, who demanded that a person carried his pack for him. The Greek word used here refers to requisitioning labour, goods and lodgings without recompense. It is exactly the same power that was used at the crucifixion to require Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Jesus.¹⁰ By doing more than was required, the enforced labourer refuses to play the game. The soldier is caught off guard and the victim has taken matters into his own hands.¹¹

Such responses are both subversive and dangerous.

Then Jesus moves on to enjoin us to love our enemies. What is most interesting here is that Matthew has Jesus say “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’” Although the Hebrew Bible does say the former, it does not say, “hate your enemy”, so, where did this come from? Commentators suggest that it was most probably a traditional view added by implication from the idea of neighbour as friend.¹²

What Jesus says about loving one’s enemies is about the definition of “neighbour”. Enemies are as much neighbours as are friends. This is why Jesus comments that the sun rises on everyone and the rain falls on everyone.

The last act in this subversive discussion is a rejection of a transactional view of human relationships in which everything is a matter of exchange. “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” “If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” We live in such relationships all the time. To an extent, they are essential in our daily transactions, in our mutual responsibility for the ordering of our life. I don’t imagine that Jesus was rejecting the ordinary commerce of life. He was, however, rejecting such transactional relationships as the definition of our life. The espousal of relational violence and a transactional view of life spell death for society both at the domestic and larger level.

Are we to take the Sermon on the Mount literally? Yes. But we need a sophisticated view of what such literalness means because it is very disturbing.

⁸ Carter, pp. 151-152

⁹ Carter, p. 152

¹⁰ Matthew 27:32

¹¹ Carter, p. 153

¹² Hill, p. 130