**Sermon** Sunday 19 February 2017

Lessons Leviticus 19: 1 – 2, 9 – 18 1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 11, 16 - 23

St Matthew 5: 38 - 48

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

May the Spirit that was in Christ dwell in our hearts. May we be filled to overflowing with the sacred Wisdom of God. Bless our meditations. Amen.

On 30January, 1956 the pastor of First Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr was at church helping to lead a service of worship. One of the speakers was the Revd Solomon Seay, a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In his address, Revd Seay mentioned two people by name: the racially motivated police commissioner Clyde Sellers and the Mayor William Gayle. Seay said:

We must love Mr Sellers and Mr Gayle for God said that we

must love our enemies as ourselves. Let’s not hate them, for

with love in our hearts and God on our side, there are no forces

in hell or on earth that can mow us down.

King’s wife and two month old baby were at their home in South Jackson Street. During the service, news was brought to King that his home had been bombed. He told the congregation and then made his way home not knowing if his family was safe. By the time King had reached his house, several hundred black protesters were already there. Many were armed with handguns, hunting rifles, knives and baseball bats. The concrete porch had a large hole in it, but his family was safe. Besides the protesters, there were many police officers and reporters. The police commissioner and mayor were also there.

It was not long before the crowd numbered over a thousand. The police failed in their attempt to disperse the crowd. While inside, King received numerous telephone calls, most of which were from well-wishers. One female caller said that the was sorry to hear about the bombing but that the Negroes were responsible. Another female caller said that she had thrown the bomb and was sorry she had done such a poor job.

Finally, King stepped outside flanked by the white mayor and white police commissioner. King said:

Everything is all right. It is best for all for you to go home.

We believe in law and order. Don’t get panicky. Don’t get

your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by

the sword…..

We are not advocating violence. We want to love our

enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to

them. Love them and let them know you love them……

God is with us. With love in our hearts, with faith and with

God in front we cannot lose.

Listening to King, some protesters has tears shining on their faces. Standing in the dark, the crowd sang, *My country ’tis of Thee, sweet land of liberty* and then their voices were raised with the hymn of John Newton, *Amazing Grace*. Softly singing ‘I once was blind but now I see’ the crowd began to disappear into the darkness. In his memoir, King later said that, ‘That night could have been the darkest night in Montgomery’s history, but something happened to avert it: the Spirit of God was in our hearts.’ Forty years after the event, King’s wife, Coretta said that that moment on the bombed out porch was:

turning point in the movement, in terms of injecting the

nonviolent philosophy into the struggle. It could have been

a riot, a very bloody. If that had happened the whole cause

would have been lost.

Two thousand years ago on a mountain in Galilee, seated with His disciples, Jesus said:

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 to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends

rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous….Be perfect,

therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’

The burden which Jesus laid upon His followers is a heavy one: love your enemies. Is it possible to love an enemy? Even if it is possible, is it desirable? Who is our enemy? Do we mean other countries, countries which potentially pose a threat to our peace and security? Dare we say to the bereaved women weeping in Aleppo, love your enemies? Are we to love the bombers who brought such destruction to the streets of Paris? Do we mean a rival company trying to put another out of business? Do we mean a bullying colleague, a colleague whose behaviour leads others to physical and mental breakdown? We would never want a woman or child who was suffering abuse to hear the words, ‘Love your enemy’: would we?

This is a minefield: we need to be careful. How are we to deal with seemingly unstable nuclear states; with terrorists whose *raison d'être* is the murder of families; with a violent partner or an abusing adult; or with a bullying work colleague? In blunt if not rude terms, an Episcopalian bishop once said, ‘There is a difference between being a fool for Christ, and being a bloody fool.’ In any credible and sensible way, what does it mean to say, ‘Love your enemies’?

Let me offer some context. Echoes of Jesus’ teaching about enemies can be found elsewhere. In the Book of Exodus, we read, ‘When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back’; in the Book of Proverbs, we read, ‘Do not rejoice when your enemy falls’ or ‘If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat.’ In an ancient Egyptian text, the *Wisdom of Ahiqar*, dating from 600BC the sage says, ‘My son, if your enemy meets you with evil, meet him with wisdom.’ In a later Jewish *midrash*, we read, ‘Who is the mightiest of the mighty? He who turns his enemy into his friend.’ The first century Jewish historian Josephus said that in warfare Jews were forbidden to burn the enemies’ fields or houses, cut down food-producing trees, despoil fallen combatants, or rape women. In a first century Jewish story, a romance set in Egypt, one Jew has wounded the Pharaoh’s son but, before he can finish him, a fellow Jew stops him. The Jew who would kill the Pharaoh’s son is told not to repay evil for evil nor trample under foot a fallen man. Instead, together the two Jews tend the wound of the Pharaoh’s son.

Restraint in war and fair treatment of Gentiles are required throughout the Bible. Much of the teaching of Jesus at this point in the Gospel of Matthew belongs to the Wisdom tradition of Scripture. Its purpose is pragmatism. What works? It is a pragmatic application of the Golden Rule: ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.’ Elsewhere, Jesus said, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ The ancients understood that action flows from what is in the human heart: if there is hatred within, it will manifest itself in violence; in word and act. Jesus was a mystic who taught the *kavanah* mindset, an inner discipline of the heart which stresses intention or sincere feeling. Jesus taught His followers to overcome their basic instinct to hate those who hate them and to replace that inner destructive power with the love of the Divine.

The thrust of Jesus’ teaching is to break the cycle of violence. Jesus inherited the teaching, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the purpose of which was fairness (what was known as a *justice of kind*) with the aim of avoiding an escalation of conflict. In going beyond that, Jesus encouraged His followers to challenge violence with understanding and compassion; He believed it was primitive and small-minded to give a bite for a bite. Religion is to be judged not by the number of times people fail to attain these magisterial teachings, but by the beauty and insight of religion’s goal.

If you say that the teaching of Jesus and the religious tradition generally are idealistic, then think of a world without such a restraint. Without a moral compass, the atheist Stalin killed how many millions…..somewhere approaching 20 million people? How many millions did Hitler kill in the concentration camps and how many suffered from Nazi human experimentation? Nearly three million people perished under the brutal regime of Pol Pot but all these figures are dwarfed by the inhumanity of the anti-religious Communist Chinese regime of Chairman Mao, murdering anywhere up to 70 million people through starvation, execution and hard labour.

In all our dealings, we must be sensible, compassionate and measured. In facing the threat of nations, terrorist groups, an abuser or a bully, we must face these with courage and work always for human dignity. The teaching of Jesus is intended to break the cycle of human violence and contain our worst excesses.

In his sermon entitled *Love your enemies*, Martin Luther King said this:

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| So this morning, as I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of  my brothers in Alabama and all over America and over the world,  I say to you, ‘I love you. I would rather die than hate you.’ And I’m  foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love  somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed.  And then we will be in God’s kingdom. We will be able to matriculate  into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love  our enemies, to bless those persons that cursed us……. |

Amen.