

Luke 6 37-42 (read passage either now or before)

Don't judge and you will not be judged

Don't criticise others or it will all come back to you

If you forgive others you will be forgiven

If you give you will receive

Before we start, part of this passage warns about the blind leading the blind, and that worries me, so perhaps we should start with a prayer...

The prayer of Jeremiah Trundle (Puritan Divine, Great Casterton, Rutland 1647)

Oh Lord, through the bowels of thy great mercy we beseech thee on the behalf of this thy humble servant who has chosen to deliver unto us an homily on the grounds that he fondly assumeth that the vision, of which he speaketh, hath been vouchsafed unto him by Thee, despite the fact that he beareth the impediment of one mighty baulk of timber thrust into one eye and also a second, like unto it, in the twain, although he chooseth to conceal this fact from us by the wearing of darkened spectacles. For we know Lord, that being led by him we may possibly, nay probably, nay almost certainly fall, in a most precipitate manner, into a DYTCH; and that this will be a dytch that brimmeth with one full fathom (yea six feet, yea 1.8 metres) of water that stinketh and in which floateth all manner of noysome uncleannesse, yea even unto a dead dogge!

And we will thus be reminded, Lord, that outside of your grace, through the foulness of our flesh and perversity of our hearts we are naught but dead dogges and loathsome wormes,

Amen

This talk can start by using the phrase beloved of the cartoon Chinaman about to shine a shaft of light on the proceedings, via the traditional wisdom of his culture...

Confucius he say (and this is a genuine quote)... the most important word to live by is RECIPROCITY - basically that means you get back what you give. It is an absolutely fundamental moral teaching common to all religions - or a form of it is common to all religions. So what Jesus is saying here is not new - but he phrases it rather differently. Other teachings tend to say - 'don't do this, or people will do it back to you' (ie people who live in glass houses should not throw stones)- but he turns it round to put the positive first - give, and you will receive. People who live in glass houses should give their window cleaners huge turkeys every Christmas....

These are the absolute basic ground rules of how Christians are to live in the world. Not judging, not criticising or condemning, forgiving, giving. Very simple to speak of - and in fact too simple to speak of simply, because we have an innate tendency to leave behind simple things and press on to more advanced studies - whereas in fact there are no studies more advanced than this. If we stand back and look at ourselves, and are honest, these simple commands go straight against our human grain, fly contrary to our nature - at least they do with me. Perhaps some people, with untroubled lives and naturally sunny dispositions, find they can obey them easily, even naturally. I cannot.

Let us unpack them briefly Don't judge and don't condemn - they are similar, so I will look at them together.. What do they really mean? They cannot mean that we suspend making moral judgements because we know God is concerned with morality. There is good and bad and it matters what people do. A couple of weeks ago a friend was telling me, with shining eyes, how she fell in love with her present partner on first meeting, she just knew it was the right person.... a heartwarming story - but the other side was that she was married already, and off stage left were a shattered husband and children.. Don't judge, don't condemn. What do I do?

We have to be wise - faced with someone who has committed an action we know goes against what we know is right, we can have two reactions, and I think Jesus' words cut in between these. One is to be sad and share a bit of God's grief over the human damage implicit in the shadowy background of the story, but to go on caring for and loving them. The other is to in a bizarre sort of way almost rejoice - we have never committed this sin, so we can feel good, smug, secure in our own righteousness, we are reinforced in an unreal assessment of ourselves. We are too good to let this temptation ever knock at our door (BEWARE). We are OK because they are not OK. Straight into Scribes and Pharisees territory.

And there is another dangerous area here - we see or hear of evil things, maybe that do not directly affect us, but which sicken or anger us, and maybe we feel we have to judge and condemn on behalf of God. I read some half-baked adolescent columnist in the Guardian mocking Christianity and am angry; I go to my computer in the morning and find thirty pieces of spam waiting for me, mostly trying to entice me into pornography or sell me dubious substances and I say rude things to them as I delete them - so I start the day cursing. Filth from the USA spewing through cyberspace across the globe -it is enough to make one sign up for Al Qaeda. I find this one hard to cope with; is this righteous repulsion and anger that I am feeling? What do I do with it.? I wrote a petty songlet at this point, leading up to the jolly chorus 'I want to be a suicide bomber for Jesus' but it got a bit sick so I erased it, so you are spared that delight! (But I will sing you it afterwards if you really want...)

But they that live by the sword die by the sword, so any bomber, anyone who takes up violence, is a suicide bomber, whether they blow themselves up suddenly or slowly. You could actually make a convincing case for crusades, and work in lots of scripture - in fact Fundamentalist Islam and Fundamentalist Christian USA both do - except that when you do so, and you are ready to start the bloodletting, suddenly is Jesus there standing in the door and he is not gentle, meek and mild, he is saying 'No! This is not my way!'. There is a little story in Luke (10,51-56) when Jesus and his disciples were turned away by a Samaritan village, and James and John, eager to use spiritual WMD, said 'Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?' (Go on, please, we want to see it, now Master, we wanna see 'em fry !) - 'but Jesus turned and rebuked them' 'So they went on to another village.'

Does God need me to get angry on his behalf?

And now to forgiving, where I want to stay for a while. This is where I am conscious of the planks in my eyes, staring past them I can glimpse a dim radiance, that is all. Forgiveness is something I am bad at. Unforgiveness, the recalling of old injuries and insults, is my natural trait, I am very efficient at that, horribly efficient. In my first week at school, what stands out is the day Michael Jones pushed me off the climbing frame - or to be honest, Michael Jones told me he was going to push me off the climbing frame.. I remember my reaction, of shock, horror, what had I done to deserve this... as if it were yesterday. The image of Michael Jones saying it lives on - have I forgiven him? (In reality I think he became a friend later on, but for some reason that bit has faded) All through junior school I was bullied, and was too cowardly to actually hit back, I just dreamed of hitting back...

There may be heredity in this as well as environment; My genes may not be helpful when it comes to being a forgiving person. one of the most difficult parts of my life was the final few years of my mother's life, when she was not very good at forgiving, in fact she once made the dreadful statement that she took pride in the fact that she never forgave anyone. Unforgiveness destroyed her in the end.

That time was very sad and traumatic but it gave me an object lesson in reality. Jesus does not just give us this teaching because he likes setting rules; it is not a donkey-and-carrot job - we will get a reward if we keep them, he will dole out a punishment if we do not. Because judging,

condemning, unforgiveness and the desire to get rather than give IN THEMSELVES all act to destroy us, that is their very nature. They are bad fruit, they are bad food, they curdle our guts. He wants to save us from that. They are all things that are bad for the other people who come into our firing line, but they are EVEN WORSE for us.

Keeping with forgiveness, and take it a step beyond the obvious one of actions and reactions within a relationship. People in everyday contact with each other, especially in families, have to forgive each other time after time, happy those who forgive and get used to it.. Lovers have a tiff, they apologise and make up, it is over, the pain is history - that is fine. But what when forgiver and forgivee are separated. - or when you need to forgive something more than a single person. Some people say that it takes two to forgive. I don't think that is true.

Can you think of times when you bear a grievance, a hurt, that is not simply against an individual? Stand back and look at different groups in society, with deep-rooted and terrible hatred and prejudice between them. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland , Jews and Palestinians, Fundamentalist Islam and America.... Back to the little story in Luke's Gospel I have already mentioned. Luke usually gives Samaritans a really good press (after all, the words 'Good' and 'Samaritan' are now inextricably linked in human consciousness worldwide) but the reason this particular Samaritan village had rejected Jesus was that he was on his way to Jerusalem; such was their dislike of the Jews, their collective unforgiveness, they missed out on the chance of having Jesus come to them.

Unforgiveness on a personal level is the root of many of our relationship problems

Unforgiveness on collective level is the roof of many of our political problems.

On a slightly smaller scale, have you ever been hurt by a group, perhaps a church group. Does that still rankle? Soon after the rather traumatic birth of SSF, when we 'came out' of Stocksfield Baptist church, I was working in Rochester; it was a bleak and wet February day and I was exploring the cathedral precinct, and desperate to get out of the cold and rain for a few minutes. I saw a sign - Christian Tea Room Open - great! Trotted round the corner - and above the door was the sign 'Rochester BAPTIST church'.....er, no thanks. I had just stopped being a baptist with a capital B, and had not forgiven the rest of them (except perhaps John, 'cos he was in the Bible). Does that sort of pain still stir up in your soul on quiet nights? You cannot forget - can you forgive? How do you do it? (Tell me, I would like to know). Perhaps there are people now who need to forgive Stepping Stones...

And there is a third sort of unforgiveness ; often back on the personal one-to-one level. When the person you should forgive is no longer around; meaning either long-distance geography or the shuffling off of this mortal coil. Here the story of my mother becomes painfully and personally relevant again. This is an area where work is still continuing. Like those building sites in town I put up screens around myself, but sometimes there are little spyholes so passers by can look in on the action; this one is still going on with me. The departed, dear or otherwise cannot themselves damage you any more - but the fact that they are not there to forgive means the matter cannot be brought to an end, no kissing and making up. The chance has passed. Yet you can go on being damaged, even devoured, by the rankle worm, the unforgiveness still active in your soul. (I wish the Celestial Vet could give us little yellow tablets like we give our cats for tapeworm, even if like us he has to fight to get them down our throats...) (Mime tableting cat; pray for the spiritual equivalent of the dash of evaporated milk the (a) induces cat to swallow and (b) shows the cat that we love it after all)

Another analogy - or actually, a truth, is that the devil loves an infestation of rankle worm; every morning your soul's computer screen will show be spam waiting from hell.com, informing you that his personal webcam is just a spiritual mouse click away (Hi there I'm Lucifer, I've got some Real Red Hot Pictures for you!, gigabytes of compressed memory files

are available for instant download. Relive those precious moments, taste the succulent flavour of resentments, mmmm run through your personalised self-justification, you really were right and they were oh so wrong. I can sex up your grudge dossier in a way that would turn Alastair Campbell green with envy! What an aftertaste! A diabolical treat in the privacy of your own soul, no-one else need ever know....

Here is a song that deals with some of these issues (Forgive the Ghosts)

And I want to finish by coming back to RECIPROCITY again, thank you Confucius. Because there is a cosmic reciprocity behind all things.. It is the fact that all our relationships are not two-way, but three way (draw diagram). Jesus talks about forgiveness again and again; what is his best known reference? The Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. I thought trespasses meant going places you weren't supposed to, up Miss Wilson's drive (she lived at the big house over the road) to pick up the conkers that fell from her horse chesnut tree, and run away when she saw me or I was pursued by her horrible black Scotty dog, Jock. In the meditation we have just done you lifted a block of wood off a mirror, symbolic of the plank in your eye, and saw looking back at you a person who needed to give and receive forgiveness, who had trespassed, been places they shouldn't in their body and heart and mind. This is where doing and being Christianity come together. Because when you try to do it, you find you fail; you have to be it as well. You be it by bringing your failure to Jesus himself, who is the only one who can forgive you and initiate the three-way forgiveness reaction. Our worst offences at all have all been directed at him. Through all time, in the way people treat his image stamped in the poor, the abused, the dispossessed and then supremely at one actual moment in history when he chose to publicly take all that was thrown at him, and make plain to the world how Creation treated its Creator. He is uniquely qualified, because he is God, and as God, at his moment of ultimate pain, distress, and suffering our evil, cried out 'Father Forgive Them'. The Them includes us.

(?play 'Qualified').