

## **Donnybrook**

20 February 2022

### **Welcome**

Welcome again, every body. It would be easy and perhaps tempting to think that our Gospel today is chiefly about morals, about how we behave. I suppose it is about morals but more profoundly it is about who we are on the inside. Character comes before action; spirituality comes before morality.

### **Topic**

Instead of being a list of instructions to follow, our Gospel is a re-setting of the compass of our lives. Three dimensions are singled out for attention.

### **Steps**

Firstly, Jesus was, in his own way, a kind of philosopher, an observer of life, with profoundly alternative ways of looking at things. His teaching to love your enemies was novel in its day and has lost nothing of its novelty. It is natural to defend yourself, to resist and to retaliate. The teaching, with its examples, seems to go against nature and common sense and sheer practicality. In the vivid illustration, if someone comes for your coat, give them your shirt as well.

It may help to remember that the vivid illustrations given are not meant to be rules of behaviour to be followed mechanistically. Instead, they are meant to shock, to pull us up short and to challenge the way we usually behave and think. The illustrations are there to make us reflect on our whole pattern of living. If someone treats me violently, there may in fact be a duty to protect myself and others. At the same time, there is a duty to break the cycle of violence. The key insight is to not respond on the level offered. This means first of all to look inside myself: what is my principle driving energy in any given situation? Is it to take revenge? To punish? To defeat?

Secondly, the call to a higher, even impossible love is a central part of the Christian message. As Jesus insistently points out, there is nothing very special about loving those who love you. Jesus' higher teaching calls for an inner conversion to seek the good, to do what is right, to be loving, beyond what comes naturally. I have seen it myself in individuals – people who have made a journey of transcendence of self. In such people, there is both liberty and luminosity. The liberty is their total freedom to choose the good consistently in all circumstances. The luminosity is the light of goodness which shines out from such people, a light which both delights and challenges us. These are very attractive people, who give us a hint, an inkling of what God must be like.

Thirdly, that very point is made by Luke: be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. So, how compassionate is God? Again, a vivid illustration is given: he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. We, in our turn, are glad recipients of God's compassion and kindness, gifts which "reside" in us only when they become part of us, only when we ourselves are compassionate and kind. When Jesus says the

measure you give is the measure you will receive, you might think this is transactional and even mercantile. But this is *no quid pro quo*. It is not transactional but existential. If I am prepared to receive the compassion of God, I have to be a person of compassion. If I am prepared to receive the mercy of God, I have to be merciful. If I am prepared to receive the love of God, I in turn must be loving on the level at which God loving. In a word, it is about who I am, the kind of person I would like to become and to be. Character comes before action; spirituality comes before morality. The ideal is high, of course, but what should it not be?

## **Conclusion**

Finally, there are occasional flashes of humour in St Paul. Writing in to the Romans, he resumes and illustrates the teaching of Jesus to love your enemies.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ... No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17, 20-21)

In other words, your goodness will annoy the socks off your enemies! Even in humour, St Paul is in earnest. The last line is our motto, our mission statement as followers of Christ: do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good, however hard, however impractical, however seemingly impossible.