

**Sermon Knox Church Sunday 19 February 2017, Epiphany 7,
a sermon preached by Rev Margaret Garland**

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 Matthew 5:38-48

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and mediations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our sustainer. Amen.

We hear the commands for living in the way of God in the reading from Leviticus. Practical, caring, catching love to neighbour in all of them. Then we come to the reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning/evening, and perhaps quietly went 'well that's one of those 'if only' passages' so we will just hold it loosely and move on. What Jesus asks of us is problematic and can't always be followed. So we can't be perfect as God is perfect.

I want to start with a story of someone who came up against this and other teachings of Jesus in very practical way. It sounds a bit contrived but they, lets say Joe, decided to live for a year following every tenet of Jesus teaching to the letter. And so it was obvious what he had to do when, early in the piece, a person came to the door, telling a story of deprivation and need. Joe gave them what they asked for and then, remembering the teaching of Jesus that if they ask for your coat, then give them your cloak as well, he gave much more than he was asked for. It was quite a few months later that there was another knock on the door, and lo and behold it was the same person with the same story and a look of expectation on their face. Who can blame them? I wonder what Joe did and what Joe was tempted to do?

This is the kind of impasse that we often come to in these teachings of Jesus when we struggle to understand the context of the words and yet still try to apply them to us today. And it often means that a very important teaching is put aside as not so relevant. Jesus' troublesome truths challenge us again this Sunday.

A colleague put me in touch with a paper by Walter Wink entitled 'Jesus' Third Way'¹ – some of you may be familiar with it – and it raises some very interesting challenges on our interpretations of this piece of scripture. He first of all identifies the ways in which he feels Christians over the centuries have mis-interpreted this passage, where we believe that turning the other

¹ <http://cpt.org/files/BN%20-%20Jesus%20Third%20Way.pdf>

cheek means we are to allow ourselves to be beaten into submission while doing nothing. Giving your cloak and going the extra mile can also engender a sense of passive over indulgence in the hope that it will make a difference. Do we see Jesus in this submissive passive behaviour – we do not.

Yet the only other alternative seems to be to hit back, only give what is asked for which are contrary to the teaching that we are to love, and love generously. So in our desire to follow both the true word and to be realistic about our living in this world we have created what we call 'just wars' – where the need for protecting ones neighbour supersedes this impractical passivity – and we enter into the violence.

Hence the title of the article – The Third Way. Wink questions the interpretation and points to the similar phrase used several times in the Epistles, where we hear said 'do not repay evil for evil'.² And he says that the Scholars version of the verses in Matthew is the most helpful translation – 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil.' Jesus is not saying to do nothing and be browbeaten into the ground – no, he is telling us to stand up to evil but not with the weapons of evil.

A little context here might help. Jesus here says something quite strange and superfluous if we are talking about someone hitting you and you not hitting back. He tells us what cheek we would be first assaulted on: the right one. And as the left hand was, in those days, considered unclean and you could be excluded from the temple for any gesturing, then the right cheek could only be a backhanded slap. And that was used only to insult, humiliate, degrade. It would be used on those over whom you had control, seeking to put them in their place. So turning the other cheek, Wink explains, was actually refusing to submit to that treatment – the backhand would no longer work. And the fist wouldn't be used – that kind of fighting was only between equals. The beginning of social revolution, he suggests.

So Wink says that what Jesus is actually saying is "Stand up for yourselves, defy your masters, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new, third way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal."

In the same way he sees the handing over of the cloak as well as the coat not as super generous giving but rather in the context of a poor man being taken to court over his debt and, knowing he couldn't beat the system that went right to the door of Roman exploitation of the Jews, telling him to walk out of

² Rom. 12:17; 1 Thes. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9

there naked, effectively letting them know what the debtor thinks of their justice and hoping that it would lead to some serious rethinking. For me this is a bit more of a stretch but interesting none the less.

The extra mile, similarly, came from the ruling that the Roman soldier, while able to impress into service any person on the street (remember Simon of Cyrene) could only be made to, for instance, carry their packs for a mile. The extra mile returns the initiative to the oppressed, shakes the foundations of what is expected – is revolutionary and unsettling. Imagine the soldier trying to figure out how to respond, how to get his pack back even.

So far from these words of Jesus offering only violence or submission, they are, according to Wink, in fact a social earthquake which, if taken up, would change the face of the world. Now that sounds more like the teachings of Jesus! It doesn't mean that there won't be unhappy consequences to those who dare to challenge accepted injustices but it does give a new meaning to being like Christ in our living.

So, if we accept this approach of ridicule and non-violent resistance to injustice and oppression is what Jesus is asking of us, how might this interpretation of the Gospel message look for us today?

For a start the purpose is not to oppress or put down the other – always when we walk the path of Jesus the purpose is to bring understanding and transformation not just to the downtrodden but also to the oppressors, that there might be reconciliation and a new way of living for all.

This is a timely message for us as we seem to be seeing an increasing degree of overt government sanctioned injustice and inequality for the vulnerable in our world. And I think that we are seeing some very Jesus like responses by people who do not choose engage in the bullying tactics but stand strong by peaceful and sometimes burlesque methods. One hopes there is a desire to reconcile as well.

Jesus looks for neither violence or helpless passivity: What are some of the ways we, in our daily life, can turn the other cheek in this Jesus like way – we hear stories of people gathering, peacefully but very intentionally against violence – like the events in Egypt where Christians surrounded and protected their Muslim brothers and sisters at worship and Muslim men did the same to as Christians worshipped.

Jesus tells us to challenge oppressive systems: Where have we given the cloak away as well as the coat to make a stand for justice? What about those people who plan to swamp any proposed Muslim register in the states with their names to show the ludicrousness of such an unjust move.

Jesus encourages us to behave in unexpected ways: When have we walked the extra mile in order to challenge the status quo and possibly befuddled the system? When people turn up with unconditional gifts to the prisoners where the prevailing attitude works on punishment by deprivation – that might be one.

Jesus word for us today is as true as it was then. For he goes on to say that we are to live in love in everything we do – and this includes our enemies, those who cause us grief, not just because it is the ‘right’ thing to do but because by doing so we are taking action, shaking the foundations of all that is wrong and unjust. We are standing up to those who would harm us using the most unexpected weapon of love.

Living in the love of God, we become free in the Spirit to find imaginative and radically new way to challenge all that is evil. Walking in the Third Way of Jesus we can only be amazed at the places it takes us and the hearts it transforms. Thanks be to God.

Margaret Garland

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

growing in courage to live the Jesus way



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net