

<b>Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> February 2019</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>Epiphany 7 – Year C</b>
Genesis 45:3-11, 15	Ps 37:1-11, 40- 41	1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
		Luke 6:27-38
<b>LOVE YOUR ENEMIES</b>		

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28).

## INTRODUCTION

Our scripture readings take us on something of a journey: the story of conflict within a family; words of advice and guidance to one who is faced with evil and wickedness; the underlying theme of hope and resurrection life out of death – which of course is THE great Gospel theme; the command to love in the face of hatred. Love your enemies. You never know what might happen to them and to you.

**Genesis 45:3-11, 15** is a story of a family reconciled. Brothers who were bitter enemies are brought together in a profound encounter of forgiveness. God brings good out of evil and hatred. Our reading is part of the great narrative of Joseph – sold into slavery by his brothers, but now lord over all Egypt, tasked with saving the nation from disaster in the face of a terrible famine. Without knowing who Joseph is, his brothers now turn to him for help. Joseph puts them to the test to see if they have changed from the jealous, deceitful group that had betrayed him and wanted him dead all those years before. Now comes the moment of truth. They are helpless before him. Will he take revenge? Will he gloat over their helpless state? Will he mock them and humiliate them? Will he take his revenge on them, now that they are so completely in his power?

He does none of these things – however justified he may have been to do so. Instead, he speaks words of healing and hope, forgiveness and reconciliation, and profound insight.

45:5 “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

45:7 “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth...”

45:8 “It was not you who sent me here, but God...”

Three times Joseph says the words “God sent me here”. Joseph has had plenty of time during the intervening years to reflect on what had happened to him, and how God has used dreadful events – violence, betrayal, deceit, brutality, cruelty, injustice, imprisonment, slavery – to preserve life, to be a sign of hope and new possibilities. How often he must have dreamed of this moment of confrontation with his brothers! What would he say to them when they saw him alive, unharmed, but not only that, in a position of power and privilege and influence, beyond their wildest dreams!

What does he say?

You intended evil, but God has used your actions for good and for the salvation of many.

A family is reconciled, an entire nation is saved from starvation, and the future of God’s chosen people is assured. Love your enemies. You never know what might happen to them and to you.

**1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50** reminds us of the central theme of our faith as Christians – the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Life out of death. The power of God to put things right. Let’s not forget this, in the midst of all that is happening around us. Love your enemies. You never know what might happen to them and to you.

**Luke 6:27-38** continues from last Sunday with what we call the ‘Sermon on the Plain’ – Jesus is on a level place (6:17) in contrast to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Jesus has chosen his twelve apostles. People have come from all over to hear him, to be

healed, and to be cured of unclean spirits. He begins to teach – and invites his disciples – you and me – to catch a glimpse of a new world, a new community. Transformation. A world turned upside down. Words to unsettle us, to disturb us, to give us hope, to call us to mercy. Not easy or comfortable words!

But there is more to come! It gets worse! Harder! “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.” (v 27).

## **LOVE YOUR ENEMIES**

I wonder if any of us gathered here for worship can say, I have no enemies. I have never been wronged. I have never experienced hostility. I have never been abused. I have always lived in peace with others. I have never known anger or resentment or bitterness. I have never been treated unjustly or unfairly. And even if we are able to say that, the history of the Eastern Cape, of our country, provides us with more than enough examples of suffering, cruelty, oppression, injustice. Every newspaper, every TV news broadcast or social media post presents us with heartbreak examples of wrongdoing, hurt, dishonesty, cruelty. Our school grounds are less and less safe spaces for our children, with bullying a horrible reality. Gangs and drugs run riot through school playgrounds. Children are not safe. Too many homes are places not of love and compassion, but of fear, of neglect, of violence, of abuse. Almost every day brings with it another terrible story of violence done, of terrible behaviour. Who of us does not feel rage and anger and resentment and hatred?

But our focus, Jesus says, is not to be on the hurts we have suffered, but on our response. Our relationships are to be transformed and governed not by hatred and rage, but by love. And so we are to respond with good deeds rather than retaliation or aggression, with blessings rather than curses, with prayer, and with love. To make peace, to reach out in love, is part of the DNA of Christians. Love your enemies.

## LOVE AS THE THIRD WAY

Love is a big word. We speak of ‘falling in love’, of love within families, of love between close friends. The love that Jesus speaks of here is not that kind of love. It is a love that seeks the good of the other person. It is a love that will go out of our way to do good to the other. It is a love that no matter what is done to us, we will seek that person’s highest good. It is a love that is an act of the will, an action that we choose to take.

Jesus invites us to walk what some call “the third way”, the middle way. On the one hand we have the way, the response, of retaliation and revenge and aggression. On the other hand, we have the way, the choice, of abdication and being a doormat, a kind of passive helplessness. Jesus calls us to the third way, the middle way, of assertive, active love that transforms septic and destructive relationships and brings hope. Love your enemies.

Jesus calls us to a generosity of heart and spirit; he leads us to the path that breaks the deadlock of bitterness and resentment. To reverse and overcome evil and alienation.

An important proviso or word of caution: to love our enemies, to bless, to do good, to pray, does not mean that we sit back and allow evil to flourish. To seek the good of others means to seek the best for all, to protect the weak, to stand firmly against wrongdoing, to guard the vulnerable against cruelty and brutality and abuse. Some have used these words of Jesus to argue for pacifism in times of war, not to take up arms. These are complex issues. In the early years of the Christian church, Christians refused to be soldiers or to carry weapons, in obedience to this commandment of Jesus to love your enemies. Every war brings its questioning, its struggles. Should I fight, or not? Is it possible to fight, to kill, to face danger and aggression and cruelty, and not be consumed by rage and hatred? We need to face the anger and hatred in our own hearts, if we are to be people of hope and transformation.

There are no easy answers, because most of us here are in the midst of it all; we may be struggling with family dynamics, with community issues, with enemies and bullies and injustice, with cruelty and abuse and unfaithfulness; we all live in a profoundly imperfect world.

Let us take heart from the words of the psalm, which we read earlier. It is not a prayer, but rather a quiet invitation into a place of trust and faith. It reminds us that you and I are not the first to face evil and struggle and a world in which the wicked appear to have the upper hand.

Trust in the Lord and do good...  
Let the Lord be your delight...  
Commit your way to the Lord...  
Be still before the Lord...

## **CONCLUSION**

We have been on something of a journey this morning: conflict within a family; a reminder of hope and resurrection life; the command to love our enemies; the prayer and call to trust in the Lord for our well-being. We are in troubled times. May God bless and strengthen us, you and me, with the grace to be signs of love and hope. God only knows what our love may accomplish.

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