

Sermon preached at an ecumenical service to mark the opening of the 46th Parliament

Bible Readings

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 5:1-12

The night was mercifully mild, but the atmosphere was heavy. Hundreds of us from across the Canberra community, representing all faith backgrounds and none, gathered in this Cathedral to reflect, to grieve, to pray and to express our solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks on Easter Sunday.

Sri Lanka

Christchurch

Paris

How is it that these names, once associated with all that is good, rightly renowned for natural beauty and the best of human endeavour, now seem overcome by evil?

What can help us stand against all that seeks to steal and kill and destroy and divide?

Perhaps a message like this:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;^[1] do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ...“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. “

That evening as a member of the Sri Lankan community stood and read this very passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans we caught a glimpse of a better way.

A better way where persecution is the pretext for blessing.

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them.

I don’t know about you but I think I’m making moral progress if I manage not to curse the person who unintentionally cuts me off on the way to work.

But what of the person who goes after you, who deliberately seeks to bring you down?

Here we are challenged not simply to play by the rules, not simply to follow due process but to deliberately seek to do them good with our actions and with our words.

This is also a better way where enmity is the opportunity for generosity.

There's a quote from the famous book the Art of War which goes something like this:

"Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."

And there's all kinds of reasons why we might want to know our enemy:

We might want to know our enemy's strategies so we can outwit them.

We might want to know our enemy's weaknesses so we can exploit them.

We might want to know our enemy's fears so we can fulfil them.

But no, says Paul – this is why you need to know your enemies.

You want to know your enemy's hunger so you can feed them.

You want to know your enemy's thirst so you can water them.

You want to know your enemies' needs so you can be generous to them.

To us this seems so counter-intuitive, even impossible. Growing up as a Anglo kid in a safe household, with access to good education and secure employment I never thought much about having enemies or being persecuted. And if I ever did I was pretty sure I'd want to get back at them.

And then God led me to pastor a congregation where 40 per cent of our members were refugees from South Sudan. And as I listened to their stories of being bombed out of their homes and losing family members and being forced to flee for their lives because of who they were or what they believed – and as I was humbled by their grace and forgiveness and hope, I saw this way being lived out.

But how is it possible? Perhaps, like me, you grasp something of the beauty of this way but struggle to see how it is even do-able.

Let me briefly suggest two perspectives, two attitudes that can help us get there.

The first is a profound gratitude for past mercies.

The past can so easily become our means of vindication, as individuals or even sometimes as a nation. We want the past told in such a way that we are the ones in the right. But there's a problem with that. We gloss over the aspects of the past that cast us in a less than flattering light. And instead of the past being a place where we learn and discover together it becomes a battleground, a zero-sum game where my or our reputation must be preserved at the cost of other's exclusion.

But right at the start of this chapter Paul invites us to frame our past differently – in view of God’s mercy. God’s mercy which blesses us with a good world. God’s mercy that takes our failure to live well in that world so seriously that he sends His own son the Lord Jesus Christ to bring forgiveness at the cost of His own life. God’s mercy that offers vindication and reconciliation not because of what I’ve done for you, or what you’ve done for me but because of what God in Christ has done for both of us.

And there’s a second perspective.

A profound assurance of future justice.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;¹ for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

This is not using God’s judgement as a threat or a club to beat others.

Nor is it about giving up on doing justice ourselves because it’s all up to God.

It is about recognising that we live in a complex world, where paying back evil for evil and going eye for eye will leave us all blind and bankrupt. We can’t hold others hostage to our version of what perfect justice looks like.

Instead, we engage our world with compassion and blessing, knowing that in the end God will do what we have left undone and set all things right.

I saw that in my South Sudanese brothers and sisters. And If they can live like that given all they’ve been through, how much more should I face my relatively petty grievances in the same spirit.

I know many of you are here today because you have heard the high calling to serve our nation and its people.

Thank you.

You know that calling will challenge you and stretch you. You will grapple with complex issues which seem to defy easy and popular solutions and you will be tempted to demonise those who disagree with you and sometimes to despair over those who don’t.

In that calling and in those moments be assured of my prayers and the prayers of the churches of Australia. You are there for us (and for Australians of all faith backgrounds and none) and we are here for you.

If I could leave us with one prayer it would be this: that all of us may grasp and be grasped by something of the vision of this ancient Christian letter.

Resting on God's past mercies, and assured of God's future justice may we bless and live in harmony and peace so that rather than being overcome by evil, together we overcome evil with good.

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