

Homily 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (19.2.17)

Friends & Enemies

I'm getting worried sometimes that the prophecy of 1984 George Orwell is coming true with newspeak, where you limit language and understanding of language to really small words with no nuance. And that particularly comes across with texting, doesn't it? I mean the first time I got a text with "lol" at the end, I thought,

"How sweet, lots of love." [chuckle]

I didn't realise it meant 'laughed out loud'. But all these abbreviations and so on, I wondered what effect it's having on many people in terms of their thought patterns. And when it comes to examining the inspired writer, and I say inspired, the writers are inspired not dictated to in the Gospel, the same spirit that inspired them is the spirit to us, to where it lights in our eyes to apply it to our own condition. But I'm not sure people are good at dealing with primary documents anymore, reading. And also, when you look at something like the gospel, and that gospel we've just listened to, people get... You said,

"Switching off,"

I've heard that before. And not listening to every word and saying,

"What does this mean for me today?"

Now with that background, I was looking at this and I was thinking, and memories came back how revolutionary this gospel is. And it's not about being soft and allowing people to tread you underfoot, it's actually passive resistance, of the style of Mahatma Gandhi.

Because Jesus is being very clever when he talks about perfection, and he needs a lot of courage to apply it. So if we just interpret it from Jesus' day, then the question that we have to ask is,

"What would it mean for me when I am laughed at, or people persecute me?"

So, eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth was the *lex talionis*, any lawyer, he would tell you it was the basis of ancient law, and it was really repayment for the like,

"Whatever you take from me, a life, and I'll take from you a life."

And it was to stop blood vengeance. It was a good law, it was to stop sort of,

"You stole my house, so I steal everything you have."

It was about restitution. So when Jesus actually challenges this law, and goes on the three examples he gives, they're very interesting.

"If anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well."

Now it was actually when you insulted someone, it was actually a slap, he didn't mean a punch. When you wanted to insult someone, you hit them with the back of your right hand, like that. And so offering the other cheek, they would have to hit you with this if you were to hit the other cheek, and they're not allowed to, that was against the law, they would have had to try and do it like that, it's not possible.

So, Jesus is actually saying,

"Yes, don't offer them resistance, but offer the other cheek."

In other words, and it's not arrogantly done, but it's actually a humiliation. It's actually saying,

"Okay, here's the other cheek. If you really want to go the full hog, disobey the law yourself and take too much retribution."

So it's challenging them on where they stand.

"If a person takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."

It's actually in the Old Testament, that if somebody lends a cloak for a loan and can't repay it back in the evening, the person must give the cloak back, because they might starve to death in cold of the night. And so if somebody's taken you to court in his day for the tunic, if you took off your cloak as well and gave that to them, you're actually showing them up. You're saying,

"Here, you're taking the last thing I have, so have the very last thing I have, and I will die and that will be an offense on your head."

So it's passive resistance, it's very, very challenging.

"And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles for him."

In Jesus' day in Roman law, if a soldier stopped you as a peasant, which most of you are, the soldier could insist that you carry their backpack one mile along a

road to a milepost, to save his energy through his marching a long distance. And it was actually enshrined in Roman law, that the soldier couldn't demand more, and if he did, he'd be subject to a fine by his superiors.

So what is Jesus saying? So when the mile mark comes, say to the soldier,
"Oh no, you've forced me to do this, I'll go another mile."

That is passive resistance, it's actually showing them up and saying,

"Well, if you wanted me to do this, are you willing to break the law? Seeing you used me?"

And when we come to the last thing about,

"You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy."

That was a sort of tradition of Jesus' day, that you only had to love your neighbour but not your enemies,

"Pray for them, and in this way you'll become children of your father in heaven. Love them, give them charity and justice, even if they don't give it to you."

This is the very thing, of course, that Nelson Mandela did. Nelson Mandela understood Jesus' teaching, which of course is the first five chapters of Matthew. Mahatma Gandhi used to read the first five chapters of Matthew every week, because he said it summed up his philosophy of life.

And Nelson Mandela understood the profound teaching of Jesus. And anybody who knows a little bit of his story knows how he won over his jailers even, and those who hated him, by the fact that he showed justice and charity. And of course, led him to when the apartheid was overthrown to build a national reconciliation, rather than a vengeance against enemies, and bringing them together, which have a profound courage and effect on people's lives.

And so, when you're looking at a document like Matthew's gospel, which is 2,000 years old, the primary source of Jesus, yes we can approach it as in Jesus' day, but the same spirit that inspired Matthew to write these sayings down is the same spirit that can work in us and say,

"What does that mean to me today in my dealings with others? Especially with those who are my enemies?"