

Utopian Nonsense (or the way of Jesus)?

A sermon on Matthew 5:38-48 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 February 2017

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Message

Although often dismissed as utopian nonsense, Jesus's teachings about non-retaliation and love of enemies are the key to the salvation of the world.

Sermon

I need to warn you up front that what I am about to preach is considered to be unrealistic and utopian nonsense by most people, even perhaps by most Christians. I intend to preach a message that takes most of us to the limits of our capacity to believe and trust in God, and then asks us to go further still. And the trouble is that you won't be able to dismiss it as just some whacky theory of Nathan's, because I'm not doing much more here than just unpacking what Jesus himself said and treating it as though he meant it.

It is not uncommon to hear preachers explaining away these words of Jesus, and suggesting that he didn't really expect us to take them seriously. I'm going to try not to do that, because I believe that Jesus was deadly serious. In fact, I think this is the absolute bedrock of his teaching; perhaps the place where it all comes into focus and the implications become clear.

We often say, quite rightly, that the centre point of Jesus's teaching is the so-called golden rule: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Some would, equally rightly, make the case for a couple of his other sayings: "Love one another as I have loved you" and "Love your neighbour as yourself," which as we heard in our first reading was already taught in the Hebrew scriptures. Highlighting these teachings is not controversial. They seem like excellent guidance, and nearly everyone thinks of themselves as living by them.

But if you suggest that the words that we heard Jesus say in tonight's gospel reading might be his commentary on what it really means to put the golden rule into practice, then brace yourself for trouble.

Because what we heard Jesus say tonight was this: you haven't even started to take my words seriously if your love is only shown to those who love you and you only do good to those who do good to you. If you are serious about following me, start showing love to those who hate you, try to be a blessing to those who persecute you, and when people attack you or treat you badly without cause, give up all right of retaliation, turn the other cheek, and go on treating them with love.

So it turns out that when Jesus said "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," he didn't mean treat others the way they treat you. He meant treat others the way you wish they were treating you, even if they aren't. He meant that when people treat you like shit, you should still treat them the way you wish they were treating you. And Jesus is quite clear about why we should do this. We are to love as God loves, and God loves without limits, no matter how badly people respond. Make that your aim too, says Jesus.

Now if you focus on what that tells us about how God loves us, it is extraordinarily good news. It is the best news that you can ever hear. No matter what you have done, no matter how badly you have behaved, no matter how thoroughly you have hated and insulted God,

God continues to love you warmly and compassionately and unshakeably. No matter even if you have attacked God viciously and spat in his face and nailed him screaming in agony to a wooden cross, God's love for you is utterly undiminished. You are still forgiven and cherished and adored by God. And even if you have hated and abused and wounded every person you have ever met in your life, still God's love is pursuing you, yearning for you to respond and to know yourself forgiven, beloved, healed and free. Good news doesn't get any better than that.

Most people will rejoice in that news. They might not be ready to believe it or surrender to it, but they will agree that it is a wonderful message. Or at least they will until they realise that it doesn't stop there. There are two things that flow from that wonderful news that stop most of us dead in our tracks, and even leave many of us offended and outraged, and Jesus is rather relentless in making sure we get the full message.

The first implication is that God doesn't love only you that way; God loves the people you despise that way too. God even loves those who you regard as totally beyond the pale. The second implication is that Jesus calls you to do likewise: to love and bless those who deserve nothing but a dose of their own vile medicine. And just when we want to brush that off as a utopian vision of the future, he sets out and lives it out himself, in the here and now, consistently, all the way to a tortured death on the cross, so that we can't pretend that it can't be done.

If the Sermon on the Mount hadn't been lived out before our eyes by a human being, then we could reasonably just admire it as a fine bit of idealism, a grand hope of a future kingdom, but go on with living our normal lives, largely unchanged. Which is, of course, what most of us do with it most of the time. It is no more than a vision for some other world. We don't see it as a manifesto for the living of our own lives.

To us, it seems natural and normal and even good to treat other people as they deserve, as they treat us and others. After all, that is the foundation of our concept of justice, and everyone is in favour of justice, aren't they? Those who have done wrong and hurt other people should be made to pay for what they have done. We may not literally demand an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth anymore, but we still expect the scales to balance out. Five years for an eye; twelve months for a tooth; thirty years for a life.

If people treat us well, we treat them well. If people hate us and threaten us and harm us, we will defend ourselves and despise and shun them and demand a sentence that reflects the extent of the injury. We reassure ourselves that, unlike them, we are good people who never initiate any sort of hostile or aggressive act. It is only when others initiate it, when others attack us first, that we resort to our fists or our police forces or our armies.

But the truth is that pretty much everyone in the world thinks that. Even the most vile and aggressive criminal thinks that he is lashing out at the world that has done him wrong, and retaliating for the injustices that have been done to him. Every war is fought between two sides who both think they are responding to the unprovoked aggression of the other. And maybe the horrible sad truth is that it's true that every one of us has more than enough reason to want to hit back at the injustice and abuse that has been perpetrated against us. Maybe it is true that every single one of us has contributed enough to the oceans of pain and suffering in the world that an all out war of everybody against everybody would be the perfectly fair and logical outcome of it all.

But if that is even half right, then Jesus's teachings in the Sermon of the Mount, far from being a utopian dream, might just be our last and only chance to be saved from utter self-destruction. These words turn out not to be masochistic, not to be excessive. They are simply the only credible way out of the apocalypse of our almost irresistible tendency to retaliate, and to retaliate with bigger and bigger weapons.

If we dismiss these words as a high-minded, idealistic vision with no real life application in the here and now, what would we have to look forward to? Simply more of the same. History repeating itself over and over, in our personal lives, in our families, in our nations, and on the international stage. More and more of the cycle of taking offence and taking revenge. More of the same, but with increasingly powerful weapons as the combination of vengeance and technology pushes us to the brink of destruction.

Jesus was deadly serious here. Either we learn the way of non-retaliatory forgiveness, and love even our enemies, or we will destroy ourselves.

Love for enemies cannot be safely theoretical. Loving our enemies in theory while keeping them on the other side of a wall or a border will not stop the bombs flying over the walls. Love for enemies has to take the initiative to go out and find the enemy and seek to make peace. God did not stay safely in heaven and love us from a distance. God became flesh and placed his body into our hands in a gesture of vulnerable peace-making.

If we stay in our different groups, loving the neighbours we are comfortable with, and keeping our distance from others, there will be no reconciliation. No misunderstandings will be cleared up. No rifts will be healed. No forgiveness will take flesh.

We have to put ourselves in the firing line, quite literally. Not because we desire to suffer, but because we desire to reach out in love, from touching distance. Jesus is quite unflinching in his acknowledgement of the price that may be paid for such love. You may well get punched in the face, he says. Turn your head and offer them the other side of your face too.

It is common to dismiss this as some sort of masochistic doormat response that lets evil have its way unchallenged. It's not that at all. Without going into the subtleties of ancient social customs, what Jesus is suggesting here is that you refuse to be humiliated, and challenge your attacker to unmask their own behaviour. This is not the battered wife just allowing the abuse to continue. This is the battered wife walking into his workplace with her head held high and saying, "I still love you, so if you are going to keep hitting me, do it here in public in front of your boss and your colleagues. Show them who you really are, or become someone better than you've ever been. It's your call."

These particular words of Jesus about renouncing retaliation and loving our enemies tell us what "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "love your neighbour as yourself" actually mean when the rubber hits the road. These are the words that show us exactly how that "golden rule" illuminates two kingdoms or two radically different cultures – the culture of heaven as seen on earth in the life and death of Jesus, and the culture of an eye for an eye, what goes around comes around, do right by me and I'll do right by you.

These are the words that show us that following Jesus is not about believing that Jesus died for my sins, and just trying to be a bit nicer to those I live near. These are the words that show us, once and for all, that following Jesus means being utterly converted, transformed, radically changed; turning our backs on the way things have always been done – “you have heard it said, but I say unto you” – and living a life that seems completely unrealistic and dangerously naïve. It means believing that a different world is possible, that Jesus may in fact have been right, that the kingdom of God really has come among us and is not just some dreamed of future. There is no doubt that we’ve never done it this way before, and that it requires immense faith to even believe it is possible, but it may just be the only authentically saving message that God has given us. It may just be that when Jesus told us to model ourselves on our Father in heaven who loves without limits or boundaries, he meant it.