

No Restraint Shown

A sermon on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 & Matthew 22:15-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 October 2023

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Message

If we keep imitating one another, paying back violence for violence, the world will be consumed in an escalating fury, but Jesus rescues us and gives us a life-giving example to follow.

Sermon

In the past couple of weeks, the world has watched on, horrified, as events have unfolded in Israel and Gaza. Having just been in Israel myself in late June, for me it feels like a near miss. But I think for many of us, there is a feeling that these conflicts are coming uncomfortably close. We have been feeling anxious about the war in Ukraine for some time, and now this one has pushed that one from the headlines, but potentially making it worse as a result. And as they layer one on top of the other, our anxiety increases.

At the end of our second bible reading, the Apostle Paul spoke of us needing to be rescued from the fury that is coming, and the feeling that there is a fury building up that is threatening to engulf our whole world is palpable. I don't for a moment think that Paul was foretelling the present events in Gaza, but he was talking about precisely this sort of thing.

Part of what makes the conflict in Gaza so terrifying is the sense of total lack of restraint, of all the brakes coming off. Hamas is brutal terrorist group, not too dissimilar in aims and style from ISIS. For the most part, they are hated by the Palestinian people they claim to represent almost as much as they are hated by Israel. Their recent unexpected attack on Israel was a sick and depraved act of mass murder, targeting mostly civilians. It was the largest mass murder of Jewish people on a single day since the Holocaust. It was utterly inexcusable.

It was not, however, utterly inexplicable. It's impossible to excuse it, but it's not impossible to explain it. Hamas can exploit the anger of the Palestinian people to its own sick ends because there is a lot of understandable Palestinian anger and despair to be exploited.

The Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands has been accompanied but a level of brutal repression that, paradoxically, is now regarded as inspirational by many of the extreme-right organisations in the world. Neo-nazis may be as anti-semitic as ever, but they love the way that Israel normalises and defends the creation of an ethno-nationalist state, and they'd certainly like a piece of Israel's capacity to maintain international support while doing it. White supremacism and Jewish supremacism are two forms of the same thing, and Israel has perfected the methodology that enables it.

Now we in Australia can certainly not claim to occupy any sort of moral high ground here, for we too were pioneers in the occupation of other people's lands and of systems of apartheid to maintain it, and even just this last weekend, when we were invited to take a significant step in facing up to that sorry history and turning things around, we diminished ourselves in the eyes of the world by hardening our hearts and refusing the invitation with a resounding "No".

One of the architects of that refusal, the leader of the federal opposition, also gave us fresh evidence this week of the ongoing international support that Israel enjoys, seemingly

regardless of how they behave, when he urged Israel to respond without restraint, saying “There must be no restraint shown to those who showed no restraint themselves in committing these vicious and vile acts of terrorism.” (<https://www.peterdutton.com.au/leader-of-the-opposition-transcript-statement-on-israel-parliament-house/>)

There are our worst fears described right there – an escalation of the world’s conflicts to the point where all sides perpetrate horrendous violence without restraint, seemingly intent on at least matching each other’s brutality. God save us from the furious wrath that is coming.

You see, what the leader of the opposition has described and encouraged there is exactly the mechanism by which the world’s wrath is stirred up to such a terrifying level of fury. When each side determines to at least match the violence and brutality of the other, it always escalates. Just like two schoolboys trading punches, what each perceives as nothing more than measured and equal reciprocation is inevitably perceived by the other as escalation, as an over-reaction which must now itself be avenged with another more fearsome strike.

What Jesus calls us to do is to treat others as we would *wish* them to treat us. What the leader of the opposition has called for is for treating others as we believe they *have* treated us. What Jesus calls us to do de-escalates conflicts. The alternative inevitably escalates them.

Strangely enough, the words we heard from Jesus tonight about giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s may have initially been heard by his hearers that day as sounding a lot like the words of the leader of the opposition, at least until he completed the second half of his sentence. You see, Caesar was another leader of a hated foreign occupation force, and when Jesus got them to hold up a coin bearing Caesar’s image, and then told them to give it back to Caesar if it was Caesar’s, it could well have been initially heard as meaning “pay back Caesar in his own coin”, a common idiom in many languages and cultures for pay back, for doing to others what they have done to us.

But then Jesus immediately subverts that idea by calling us to pay back God in kind too, to live not as those who bear the image of the emperor, but as those who are created in the image of a loving, merciful, non-violent God.

Jesus points us to the mechanism of change, to the way of escape that he provides us from the coming furious wrath, and indeed, the Apostle Paul talks about this mechanism too. When Jesus asks us to think about whether we are acting in the image of the brutal emperor of the occupation powers, or in the image of God, he is asking us to consider who we are modelling ourselves on, who we are imitating.

When we act without restraint towards those who have acted without restraint, we are in fact imitating our enemies, we are modelling ourselves on them. Whatever they do, we imitate and do back. And when we model ourselves on our enemies, we become just like our enemies. In fact, we become our enemies, or at least the indistinguishable mirror image of them. This is the mechanism that drives the escalation to extremes that we so fear. The cycle of violence and vengeance is driven by our modelling of our actions on the worst actions of those who have acted against us. We imitate one another. We must avenge and then they must avenge and then we must avenge again and every round escalates a little further, without restraint.

The problem is though, that we can’t simply choose to not imitate. Imitation of one another is hard-wired into us. It is how we learn, how we decide what to wear, how we work, how we

develop as human beings. The question is not whether we will imitate; it is who we will imitate. The only way we can stop imitating our enemies, and becoming more and more like them, is by choosing an alternative, by deliberately modelling ourselves on someone else instead.

This is exactly what following Jesus is all about. When we talk about following Jesus, that's what we are talking about. We are not talking about walking from Galilee to Jerusalem and back because that's where Jesus went. We are explicitly talking about imitating him, about modelling our behaviours and our patterns of response to others on his ways. When we are not sure how to respond in a given situation, we are talking about seeking to discern what Jesus would do in this situation, and imitating that, modelling our response on his.

And at its best, this extends out to become one of the basic functions of community life among the followers of Jesus. Part of how we learn to follow Jesus and model our behaviours on his, is by learning from those with more experience in following Jesus. The Church is the body of Christ, and when it is truly being so (which is not always, I'll admit) it is the embodiment of Jesus's life and ways in the world. We learn from one another what it means to follow Jesus and behave like Jesus.

You may have missed it, but this was stated clearly in tonight's second bible reading, the one from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Speaking of how the people in Thessalonica became followers of Jesus, he says, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord," and he goes on to say that subsequently, "you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."

Do you hear that? They became followers of Jesus by "becoming imitators" of the established and experienced followers of Jesus, and through imitating them, they became imitators of the Lord. And then, as they themselves became experienced and proficient in following the ways of Jesus, they themselves became examples to others, so that others could model themselves on their example and thus become imitators of the Lord too.

This is entirely relevant to our consideration of what is going on in Israel and Gaza, because Paul says that this demonstration of learning by imitation among the Thessalonians is happening in a time of persecution. He says, "you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit."

So it seems almost certain that part of the imitation and modelling that Paul has in mind is their imitation of older Christians and of Jesus himself when they are faced with violence and persecution. When we look to the example of Jesus, do we see Jesus choosing to respond in kind without restraint to those who have treated him violently without restraint? No we do not. We see him continuing to pour forth love and mercy without restraint.

This is the ultimate freedom we are called to embrace in Christ. The freedom to separate ourselves from the compulsive cycles of violence and vengeance, the freedom to not have our actions and responses dictated by the actions and responses of our enemies. And we embrace that freedom by deliberately rejecting the modelling of our enemies and choosing to model ourselves instead on the one who has most perfectly modelled gracious restraint, undeserved mercy, determined de-escalation, and a willingness to absorb in his own body the hostility of

his enemies so as to suck the hostility out of the system and help prevent it from continuing to ricochet around.

Friends, we are in one of those periods where turning on the news is particularly terrifying. It easily leaves us with the feeling that the Apostle describes, the feeling that a furious wrath is building up, and breaking out in various places, and threatening to escalate and engulf the whole world.

In the face of that, our first instinct is, of course, to pray, and that is a good thing and it has been very evidently happening in our daily prayer liturgies. But that is not the end of our calling. We are also called, like the Thessalonians, to be those who take our example from Jesus and so provide a model to the world of another way of responding to the escalating cycles of violence and vengeance, a way that de-escalates them by absorbing the hostility and refusing to ever reciprocate it.

That is to be seen in both the ways we respond to those close at hand who want to make life difficult for us, and in the ways we imagine and talk about the big global conflicts. The two cannot be separated. We are not being called to model ourselves on Jesus in one sphere, and on the leader of the opposition or the Israeli Defence Forces in the other.

Though it is a common misunderstanding, when Jesus spoke of rendering to Caesar and rendering to God, he was not proposing that we compartmentalise life into two spheres with different rules for each. Rather he was asserting that the sphere of politics and empire and international relations exists only within the sphere of God's cosmos, and thus, having been made in the image of God and called to live into that image by modelling ourselves on God made visible in Jesus, we are to render to God what is God's in any and every sphere of life.

The challenge of living that out is never more evident than when the threat of an escalating furious wrath seems to be upon us but, as Paul says, Jesus rescues us from that coming fury, and Jesus does that precisely by opening up a new pathway out of it, and walking that pathway all the way to death on a cross and out the other side into new life, and calling us to follow him. And in following him, in taking our example from him, lies the salvation of the world.