

Re – reading the bible

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A girl comes to see me. She is upset. She feels wronged. She is perhaps to some extent. But she is a woman of faith. I gently mention that Christianity is about forgiveness and she retorts that she used to think like that but that this is different and she's read lots of good counsellors (Christian ones) who agree with her that by voicing her concerns and her wrongs she is preventing it happening to another person.

Now don't get me wrong. In certain cases, extreme cases, such as rape and abuse I agree 100 percent this sentiment. Hers is not such a case. Someone who has a perceived wrong, who feels left out of a group. I know both sides, I know they met and spoke with her and tried to come to an agreement but she continues to feel this hurt. I try to use a greater wrong from my own life which I've not thought about because I forgave the person to demonstrate the way forgiveness helps us move on, stop being a victim, but she simply thinks my case was worse and I that was awful to let it go. She misses the point.

Finally, and perhaps I should have used it first, I quote these last few verses from Matthew,

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

She isn't ready to accept this. She goes on again about wise counsellors she knows who think she should fight on, that she shouldn't accept the outcome of her situation.

Hers is not a serious matter the situation is sad but threatens no one but her own sense of justice, but she cannot forgive, or let go, or even see herself as in the wrong too and this is my point.

We are in the era of litigation – just as in Jesus' time – unforgiveness rages on, the need to be in the right or the wronged one, is still there and churches and church communities are full of it.

The impossibility of what Jesus asks is not missed on his listeners. They would all know the commandments and the phrase 'going the extra mile' is now part of our language as in doing more than is necessary. And here Jesus takes each commandments and goes further. And yet, Jesus says this IS necessary, this IS the point. The commandments were written to encourage compassion and love but we can go further than that.

I am sure many of them asked as we still do today – but how can I be perfect as God is perfect?

The real point of the passage I suppose is - we can't, but we can try to perfect our forgiveness, our love, by embracing God and letting his heart grow in ours.

It isn't about the outward law, not murdering, not committing adultery, not taking more revenge than is necessary (ie. An eye for an eye) and loving your neighbour.

It is about changing your heart, to be like God. So that you see your enemy as also God's child.

In Roman times, there was a real risk of being asked to give a Roman soldier your cloak or to walk with his bags for a mile. In fact it was a law to be asked to walk just one mile by any soldier, all of Jesus' followers in the occupied Palestine knew this – to suggest to go two miles yourself was unthinkable and beyond the law of the Romans. So he is radical with both common law and religious law. Helping the soldier is like helping a brother.

Going on to recite some of the ten commandments they would have all known so well, again he asks the impossible, to tear out an eye that's even lustful after another, not just do not commit adultery but to go beyond it. No one can do what he suggests. He is using language to make a point. A common practice by Rabbis, exaggerate to make a point, he doesn't mean tear out your eye literally, but he saying we all have lusts even if we don't act on them.

His point is no one is justified before God, every one of us is a sinner, even if we outwardly obey every law. Once we realise this and come to God in the spirit of humility his action of working through us, drawing us into his love and forgiveness can begin. We can only forgive our enemies if we too know that we too have sinned, sometimes we too have been selfish or in the wrong. We can only be truly open to God if we know that we are not God that obeying rules won't make God love us more or less but that trying to follow Jesus and love radically as he did will draw us closer to God because love is who God is.

I felt sorry for the girl who visited me because she was so sure of her own righteousness she wasn't able to see that those around her were trying to accommodate her needs and so she wasn't able to forgive. She was stuck in her bubble of hurt. She still is.

Sometimes God calls us to radically forgive those around us. This whole passage reminds us of that. The ultimate sacrifice of God not going just the extra mile but dying on a cross and even as the nails were hammered in to his hands crying out, 'father forgive them they know not what they do'.

This is the level of 'perfection' that Jesus is talking about is impossible for us without his help. The perfect love that casts out fear, the perfect love that isn't afraid of appearing foolish, of reaching out to the enemy of going the extra mile. Only Christ can give us such limitless love, through his holy spirit.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were so obsessed by the law they had forgotten compassion, love, kindness, they used the law to their advantage and Christ calls them 'white washed tombs' inside the bones are rotten but outwardly they appear good.

We too are challenged by this. It's not enough to come to church, to do our best to be nice people, God wants our hearts for himself. He wants us to realise we are a group of sinners and not perfect people meeting together which is why communion is at the heart of our worship every week.

Why? Because it reminds us of God's love, sacrificial love for us. The love that has no limits. The perfect love that cast out fear, the love that is always willing and ready to forgive and give everything for us. And by forgive I don't mean condone. I don't mean saying it doesn't matter. I mean saying it does matter but I'm letting it go, I'm letting God in the sinless one to take control of my heart and life and I'm not letting fear, hate despair separate me from him anymore. I'm letting his perfect sacrifice once and for all on the cross to be enough for me.

His giving of himself to replace the old law with a new radical one, that goes beyond just obeying because we must but because we are loved and needed and wanted and God's love for us compels us to want to do our best to be 'perfect' even as our father in heaven is perfect. Anyone who has been love knows what it is to go the extra mile. God is desiring us to love him in this unconditional hope filled way and in return he will fill us with his unconditional everlasting love for the world.

I know this side of heaven that can't happen fully but celebrating communion week on week reminds us that God enters into our heart through the bread and wine and transforms us until He comes again in glory and until then we strive to be perfect in forgiveness, love and understanding. Not in our own strength but by the power of the holy spirit God gives us. In his strength as his children daring to call him father.

This challenge is a daily one, we are all sinners and as I movingly heard recently Paul and Peter were perhaps great leaders because both were so aware of their own sinfulness. The story of Peter denying Christ three times must of course have been told later by Peter himself, what humility it was to admit that and yet what grace of Christ to re affirm Peter three times too, Paul's word 'when I am weak then am I strong' remind us that he also never resolved the 'thorn in his side' and yet God used him despite it or because of it even more greatly.

God hasn't chosen a perfect people, it is Christ living in us that makes us perfect. It is once we grasp our own sinfulness, our **need** for God that we can truly grow, in his love and his forgiveness, his grace. When it goes beyond simply the rules but gets behind their motive and this is what Jesus is pushing them to realise in our Matthew passage today. An eye for an eye was put in place to curb revenge – but how much better to never desire it in the first place, how much better to choose to forgive even if you are in the wrong, so that each may keep their eyes.

How much better to offer our hurts and offences to God today? Those things we are still holding on to right now. The indignation at some small hurt or large one. Think of the freedom of just letting it go and leaving it at Christ's cross and celebrating truly and deeply at communion his sacrifice that allows you to let it go.

In an era of litigation we have much to learn about settling out of court, about choosing not to be offended, about believing the other's story, about forgiving those who have hurt us, about giving second, third or even fourth chances, because God has forgiven us, God is the God of forgiveness. He doesn't expect us to enter back into dangerous situations but he does expect us to move on with our lives, but letting go and forgiving what happened in the past and seeking a new future in and through him and this is what our communion celebrates.

The Lord's prayer is our daily prayer partly because it daily reminds us 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. The challenge is there. This radical love. We are called into a community of forgiveness, that heals and doesn't divide. We are called to let past hurts go, to move forward together, imperfect people made perfect through Christ, who allows, dares us to call his father, our father.

He shows us the way so we can show one another and the world the same.

A way I hope and pray the girl who came to see me will one day grasp for herself.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. **AMEN**