

Thursday 9th July 2020

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:38-42

This passage, of course, comes from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus offered a radical re-interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus has already elaborated on the sixth commandment “You shall not kill” and broadened the scope to include anger as something equally worthy of punishment. After that he took the next commandment “You shall not commit adultery” and explained that this includes lustful thoughts, not merely actions.

Now, he picks up what would have been another well-known principle of Judaic law, that one was entitled to equal restitution (“eye for eye, and tooth for tooth”) if wronged by someone else. But this time, instead of broadening the scope, he turns it round, saying that the correct response to aggression and evil is no longer to fight back and seek revenge (or even compensation).

At first sight this seems odd. A little while earlier, Jesus had said that “he had not come to destroy the law or the prophets... but to fulfil.” So how do we reconcile this with what seems like a total rejection of an established tenet of Judaic law?

It is worth noting that Jesus is not promoting inaction. He is not saying “*If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, ignore them and walk away*” - that would have been to ignore the consequences of the evil-doers action. Instead, Jesus agrees with the idea that an evil act demands a response; he re-affirms the idea that aggression should not go unacknowledged. But in his response, Jesus requires us clearly and, almost provocatively, to offer our other cheek. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said “when evil meets no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn and it at last meets an opponent which is more than its match.” The act of aggression is not ignored; it does not go unrecognised. Instead, “Violence stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter-violence”.

What this passage, as well as the preceding ones on murder/anger and adultery/lust have in common, is that they all stress the damage that follow in the wake of pride and self-righteousness. By angrily calling someone a fool, we are asserting our own importance, valuing our own feelings higher than those of others. By entertaining lustful thoughts, we are deeming our own pleasure as more important than the honour and respect we should afford our fellow man and woman.

So, in this passage, we are enjoined to forego our right to seek the vengeance that would naturally result from us asserting our own importance, our own worth. And when we look for a model to prove that evil can be brought low, not by violence, but by humility and sacrifice, we have no further to look than the cross, where Jesus (1 Cor. 15:55) drew the sting of death itself.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Philippians 2:3, 5-8