

EPIPHANY 7 YEAR C

St John the Divine

Genesis 45:3-11,15 Psalm 37:1-11,40-41 1 Corinthians 15:35-50 Luke 6:27-38

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27

I imagine that most of us want a peaceful, calm and happy life. We want it in our family. We want it at work. We want it in the church and in all the communities to which we belong.

But – sometimes, things come unstuck. Conflict and criticism can emerge. So can resentment and anger. There can be deep disappointment. There can be a feeling of threat that all that is really important to us is being undermined or changed or taken away or completely destroyed by the words or actions of someone else.

When that happens, life becomes tough. Emotions hit a high point, triggering anger or sadness or revenge or despair. Fight – or flight? Which shall it be? How we respond when we are truly provoked or threatened has long term effects on us. When it affects a group of people at work, in our leisure activities or sadly, sometimes in the church, the consequences of conflict are destructive and devastating.

Today's gospel reading speaks directly into circumstances such as these. It's deeply provocative. Once more, as followers of Jesus, we are challenged to a counter cultural response. The measure of our discipleship and our decision to follow Jesus is that we will intentionally choose another way:

We will not use words as weapons.

We will not constantly replay and recite criticism.

We will not put other people down.

We will not hang onto things of the past and let them negatively shape and dominate the future.

And, we will choose to do that because we are people who listen to Jesus:

'But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27

These are words to really wrestle with; words that deeply challenge us.

It's only with God's help that we can find the strength and courage to do these things.

If only we could change, we would be blessed.

We are not the first people to struggle putting Jesus' words into action.

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. Luke 6:32

Dear friends, these words speak directly into situations we know well. We have experienced firsthand the brokenness that comes with division in the church. We know the pain caused by criticism and disunity. We know the sadness of loss as people leave and the confusion

that comes with it. We know how hard it is to forgive and how difficult it is to deal with anger. Today, Jesus speaks into this situation, just as he did with his loved disciples - and we must listen. Love is the principle. Forgiveness is the challenge. Without repentance, forgiveness and love, all is lost.

Jesus' advice is tough. He challenges us to think of our own motives when there is conflict – and to ask what we hope to gain. Will we choose always to 'put on love'? Will love be the guiding principle in all we say and do? Will we recognise the times when we have failed in love and when we ourselves have been in the wrong?

It's a big call. Naming and recognising the times when we have not listened to or fully understood Jesus' teaching or when we have ignored the prompting of the Holy Spirit in our relationships with another person or a group takes real courage. None of us wants to think that we have been in the wrong or that we have ignored the command to truly and sacrificially love. When we are convinced we are in the right and someone else is in the wrong it's so hard to understand that that might not be true; to get to grips with the sad truth that our own words and actions are part of the problem. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who worked so hard for Peace and Reconciliation in South Africa said, "*We are not responsible for what breaks us, but we can be responsible for what puts us back together again. Naming the hurt is how we begin to repair our broken parts.*"

It's Jesus' words about repentance, forgiveness and blessing that are at the heart of this reading. They are very personal words to each of us.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. Luke 6:37-38

We must all turn away from judgement and condemnation of others. We must reject these things and let love rule. When we do, God's grace, forgiveness and love will be given to us and our lives will be full of abundance and blessing.

Imagine if that could happen in the relationships that have been such a worry to you.

Imagine if it could happen in every group, perhaps even in the church.

When love and forgiveness prevail there is blessing and hope.

'But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27

May Jesus' words touch us all today and give us courage as we look to the future with hope. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we go forward and our loving God bless us with the gift of forgiveness and grace.