

# **Followers of The Way**

## **Loving your enemies, while standing for Truth**

**Heather Scammell, 29-03-26**

**Matthew 5:43-48, Psalm 101**

Today is Palm Sunday, when we remember that triumphant entry into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a humble donkey. Jerusalem, the city over which Jesus had wept, resounded with the cheers of people who just a few days later would shout, 'Crucify Him.' God Incarnate, who came *down* to earth to redeem mankind, rode *up* into Jerusalem to fulfil that supreme act of redemption. He rode up on a simple beast of burden, knowing that this was the culmination of His work here on earth and that He would face the greatest ordeal imaginable, beyond our imagining. We can become almost inured to the magnitude of what Christ Jesus did over that Passover period because we know the outcome and rejoice in it, but pause for a moment to consider what a huge inversion of human values this was, IS. He left all the glory of Heaven to take on human form, not even as a rich prince in a palace, but a baby, born to an insignificant couple in a rural backwater. He endured scorn, derision, outright hostility as he walked amongst us proclaiming, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.' (Mark 1: 14-15) Time and again he spoke against the norms of society, challenging conventional wisdom: 'For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' (Matthew 23:12); 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' (Matthew 16: 24); 'the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves' (Luke 22:26); 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,' (Luke 6:27).

And we read these passages, we maybe nod along because it all sounds so lovely, and perhaps we think we don't really have enemies as such — we're a pretty nice person overall, and Jesus loves us and it's all going to be wonderful in Heaven ... but perhaps we miss the point? The world would have us believe that Love is almost independent of us, it's an emotion we can't control: 'You can't help falling in love' is the apparent justification for a marriage wrecking affair. But you do have the choice to act on the impulse of attraction, especially when you are already committed to another. Christian love, Biblical love can be tough, it requires an act of determination, resolve to work through the difficult patches, to learn to navigate the differences that can cause so much friction; it is a willingness to say things which may not be popular, but need to be said to your nearest and dearest, but also the willingness to hear and receive things that you may not want to hear, but that need to be heard. Christian love has boundaries, set for our protection, and requires supreme acts of will – so what does it mean to really love our enemies? Not with lip service, but to actively love those who wish us harm? How should we pray for them, bearing in mind some of the emotions expressed in the Psalms? To show love exposes a vulnerability that feels the sting of rebuttal, particularly where we feel that rebuke to be unjustified.

Perhaps a good place to start would be to recognise what we mean by our 'enemies.' We are not talking about differences of opinions with fellow Christians, there are clear Scriptural

guidelines as to how we deal with these differences and we really should not regard fellow Christians as enemies (even though The Enemy may actively seek to use them – and us – to sow division.) Our enemies are those who knowingly or otherwise are recruited by Satan to tear down and destroy those who stand for Christ. The book of Psalms references enemies 74 times, more than any other book of the Bible; it speaks of David's enemies, Asaph's enemies, Israel's enemies, God's enemies. And **your** enemies, **my** enemies. Here are just a few references from the early Psalms:

*'Arise, Lord! Deliver me, my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.'* (Psalm 3:7)

*'Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make your way straight before me.'* (Psalm 5:8)

*All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish; they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.* (Psalm 6:10)

A dictionary definition of the word 'enemy' is a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something. A wider definition given is, 'a person who feels hatred for, fosters harmful designs against, or engages in antagonistic activities against another; an adversary or opponent.' The Hebrew word *oyebh*, most often translated as 'enemy' or 'enemies', literally means 'one who hates.' There is also a word *tzarar*, which appears 58 times in the Hebrew Bible, but in only 14 of those is it rendered as 'enemy', and more commonly refers to an "adversary, (be in) afflict(-ion), besiege, bind (up), (be in, bring) distress, enemy, harrower, oppress, pangs, shut up, be in a strait (trouble), vex."

We are used to the idea of the World, the flesh and the devil, three types of enemy described in the Bible. The World is the visible enemy, the devil the invisible, (the spiritual,) and the flesh the inward, where we struggle with our own fallen nature. such as when Paul laments in Romans 7:19-20, *'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.'*

When Jesus tells us to *Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us* (Matthew 5: 44), it is clear that he is talking about real people in a real world situation. There are enemies on a national level such as those we read about in the Old Testament; the Canaanites were Israel's enemies because they opposed their entry into the Promised land, for example. Today, the closest modern populations to the Canaanites are the Palestinians and Lebanese, including the Bedouin and Samaritans amongst them. The Ammonites were regarded as enemies because of their oppression (Judges 11:36), and their descendants can be found in Jordan, along with those of Moabite descent. Direct descendants of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires are found in modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. Ancient hostilities still run deep! There is probably a whole series to be taught on wars, just wars, the role of Israel on the World stage, a Christian response to national aggression, and the folly of an open doors policy that pretends all cultures and all faiths are equal and can co-exist in some sort of secular Utopia separate from the Lordship of Christ. But this is not what Jesus was addressing in The Sermon on the Mount; He was speaking to His disciples and those who had sought Him out to hear His teachings.

Whilst we do not actively seek to make enemies (Romans 12:18 urges us, *'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,'*) we must all be aware that there is a huge

spiritual battle raging over the whole of humanity and that Satan actively recruits workers for his mission of destruction. 1 Peter 5: 8-9 cautions us :

*'Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.'*

We are targets because we are Christians; Satan, through his human agents (who are often unaware that this is the motivation for their antipathy towards us) is intent on doing us harm. It is unrealistic to think that we don't have enemies — we would be failing hugely in our calling if we were so ineffective we didn't attract any criticism, but neither should we regard every difficult situation as a direct enemy attack, a sort of spiritual version of 'reds under the beds', cold war mentality. God does lead us through difficult situations to hone us for His service and, if we are honest, we do bring hostility upon ourselves when we step away from God's path for us. So first and foremost, we need to centre ourselves on the Lord and make sure we are equipped with the spiritual armour He provides and pray for His gift of Discernment, so that we really do recognise our enemy.

But then we must confront exactly how counter-cultural is the message that Jesus brought; all the instincts of our human nature urge us to lash out in response to criticism, sadly we are seeing this writ large both within Church and Political circles today — 'I am right and those that disagree with me are not just wrong, but evil.' Some may be, we will come back to the conundrum of Christians who move away from Gospel Truth and must be held to account (and how to do that in love, not arrogance). But, as a Society that is moving far away from its Christian roots, we are losing the ability to handle difference and recognise that there are situations when differing opinions are equally valid. Above all, as society becomes increasingly de-humanised, we need to look at the humanity in our 'enemies;' to see them as souls that are lost, look on them with the compassion that Jesus showed, that He shows, and ask the Holy Spirit to help us to love our enemies. There is a purpose to this which by today's standards might seem 'passive aggressive;' Proverbs 25: 21-22, quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20 says:

*'If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;  
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,  
and the Lord will reward you.'*

But, in Romans, Paul places it immediately after verse 19: *'Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.'* We are not to act from a position of judgement or superiority, but from Love.

If we love people, we actively seek to work for their good, prioritising their interests above our own. We look to encourage, to promote their well-being. We *want* God to bless them and many of us agonise over loved ones who reject Christ because we long for them to be saved. But we also have boundaries that are clearly defined, if we prioritise Christ FIRST in our lives. Those of you who were at last Thursday's Bible Study will recognise the challenge to put God First in our Finances, Interests, Relationships, Schedule and in our Troubles. This is what anchors us and helps us to stand for the Truth, rather than allow our empathy towards individuals lead us to the conclusion that their way of life is perhaps not so bad after all — that gay couple genuinely love one another, God is love, so that love must be right in God's sight; and suddenly we are an 'affirming' Church that no longer recognises sin and calls it out. How often do we hear of Christian Leaders or Churches that have lost their way because they have repackaged the Truth

to avoid 'offence' and become one with the World? How many have fallen that way? Or become so accustomed to unmarried couples cohabiting that they no longer see it as wrong. 'Everybody' takes office stationery home, so we do too; casual blasphemy is so widespread that we are no longer shocked by it and start using it ourselves. Little by little, we can be conformed to the standards of the world and suddenly find ourselves hiding from our Lord because, like Adam and Eve, we are ashamed of our nakedness.

The Psalm we heard read earlier (Psalm 101) shows David's determination to stand firm in the Lord. He sings praise to God, determines to lead a blameless life, and not look with approval on anything vile. This is far removed from those today who 're-imagine' the Gospel to claim that because Jesus loves us as we are, he therefore affirms us in our sin. David asserts that he will have *nothing to do with evil*; he will *silence those who slander their neighbour in secret*, he will *not tolerate whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart*. His eyes will be *on the faithful in the land*, he will *not allow anyone who practices deceit to dwell in his house*, nor *allow anyone who speaks falsely to stand in his presence*. He will *put to silence all the wicked in the land and cut off every evildoer from the city of the Lord*.

This is Kingdom living, not repackaging sin as a personal choice and pretending that it is not an affront to Almighty God. It is determinedly ring-fencing our homes as places that uphold Godly standards. It is calling out evil for what it is and setting boundaries and upholding Truth.

It is very easy to become wrapped up in the idea that, because apparently nice people do some pretty awful things, the things themselves are somehow not so bad; we see that in the world as a PR machine actively seeks to evoke sympathy for a disgraced 'celebrity.' We need to keep measuring ourselves against God's standards, which will not only keep us humble, because we can never measure up and are only made righteous in His sight through the gift of Christ, but also because it keeps us aware of the pull of sin on our lives.

The more we measure ourselves against God's Holiness, the more we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ, the less we will be satisfied by the ersatz thrills of 'worldly pleasures'. But we are still tempted by sin, it tantalises and promises much, but delivers the wreckage of a broken relationship with God.

There is nowhere this is more obvious than in today's Church. With the Anglican Church apparently in free fall, Social Media is full of pleas to return to Rome, join the Orthodox Church, or any one of a number of evangelical or break away Anglican groups. Increasingly, it seems that people are becoming more entrenched and increasingly pejorative of those who hold differing views; it is as though we are mirroring previous generations who built a new Chapel near to the one with which they had fallen out. These days there seems to be a plethora of auto-immune conditions, unknown in previous generations, where the body begins to attack itself, and it does seem that today's Church is similarly afflicted. Now there are First Order issues where we must agree, and those who do not are rightly regarded as 'heretics'; these need to be cut out, with parallels to Matthew 5:29

*If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

The Bible is quite clear about the dangers of False Teachers; in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul outlines the dangers of these from his own experience, obviously refuting some unjust criticism in his response, but also calling them out:

*'For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.'* (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

But there are many other areas where we differ, which should not lead to schism — just as different personalities find richness in different types of worship. There *are* even Bible Believing faithful Christians still in the Church of England and the Anglican Churches of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is why the Creeds are so important, they concentrate on what unites us, the important doctrine that holds us together whilst we may disagree over other issues — that has been happening since the earliest days of the Church. Just read some of the Epistles! Laying aside the apostasy within the Church of England, which Lynda has critiqued far more eloquently in this week's email than I ever could, the personal remarks that other critics have directed at Sarah Mullally do not reflect well on the Christian Church. By all means call her out for her failure to uphold Christian Teaching and dallying with the World and other faiths, but to criticise her for her looks, as some have, seems very ungracious.

Standing for Truth is important, all the more so in a World where Truth has become relative; we totally refute that 'your truth' is equally valid if you deny the Lordship of Christ and your lifestyle reflects that, but that doesn't mean we should insult your appearance, or make other personal remarks. One of the problems in the debate around homosexuality is that a criticism of the lifestyle has been taken personally; the message to love the sinner, hate the sin, has not been understood. What is heard is not, 'The *things you do* are wrong,' but 'You are wrong', and bitterness and rancour are sown. This is where the importance of showing Love is so crucial. We too are broken and incomplete, but are in the process of being transformed into the people Christ would have us be. Too often we give the impression we are saying, 'Come to Church and become like us,' whereas we should be saying 'Come to Christ and let Him transform you into His image.'

In human terms, what Jesus taught is not possible, our fallen natures just cannot comprehend loving our enemies, or that there really is only One Truth, written in the Bible. But God knew that we would fail in our own strength. Jesus was subjected to public humiliation, physical agony and spiritual anguish, not because He had done anything wrong, but because **we** had. Once we understand precisely what He has done for us, perhaps we can begin to show that love for those who still stand and shout, 'Crucify!' Because we were once part of that crowd ourselves. We are called to '*make disciples of all nations,*' (Matthew 28:19) that means proclaiming Christ crucified and resurrected, dying to self and living for Christ, allowing Him to transform us by the work of the Holy Spirit so that we are motivated by genuine Christ-centred sacrificial love. We must remain grounded in Him through immersing ourselves in Scripture, praying, spending time with Him and protecting ourselves against the attacks of Evil, so that we are not subtly persuaded into affirmation. It is a delicate balance which we cannot, **must not** do in our own strength but be assured by what the Lord said to Paul:

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'* 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10

May His grace be sufficient for us, as we determine to love our enemies whilst standing for Truth. Amen