

REVENGE

Jeremiah 15. 15-21

Romans 12. 9-21

Matthew 16. 21-28

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I would like to start my talk this morning by sharing a story.

It is about a man called Luke, who in a very important war had served his country 'beyond the call of duty' and had been decorated with many medals. One day Luke discovered that an old boyhood friend of his named Sam was serving time in prison, and that he had eight more years to serve. Luke went to the prison warden and asked if he could visit Sam, to which the warden agreed. Luke and Sam talked for two hours, and during that time there was much laughter as the two friends remembered some of the things that had happened in their youth. A month later Luke sent a letter to the Prime Minister of the country, and in it he wrote: 'I have not been able to sleep. Sam, my best friend from boyhood, is in prison. He was a good lad; and given my exceptional service to our country, I am writing to ask if a pardon might be granted. I promise to take Sam into my business and into my home, for he has no family, and I have a big house.'

A week later the Prime Minister wrote back to Luke and said, 'Here is the pardon, but it is yours under one condition: that you sit down in the prison warden's office and talk with Sam for two more hours. If you then think that you should give him the pardon, take Sam home. I will parole him to you.'

Luke hurried over to the penitentiary and again sat down with Sam in the warden's office. Luke said, 'Sam, when you get out of here, will you go into business with me? I might even get you out of here sooner than you expect.'

Sam got up. He walked around awhile, looked out of the window, and then said, 'I can't accept that invitation, because I've got something to do when I get out of here, something very important. I'm going to do it just as soon as I get out of here.'

'What is it, Sam?' Luke asked. Sam turned around; fire glinted from his eyes and hatred filled his whole face. He said, 'I am going to get two men together – the judge who sent me up here and the witness – and I'm going to kill them both with my bare hands.' Luke left the prison warden's office and tore up the Prime Minister's pardon.

Such is the desire for revenge in humankind. Sam lost the opportunity for a pardon because his heart was full of hatred; and his only desire was for revenge. But revenge comes in less graphic forms as well, such as in the story of the old pious, but somewhat cranky old lady, whose neighbours inadvertently forgot to invite her to a picnic. On the morning of the event, the neighbours suddenly realised that they had forgotten the old lady, and they sent a little boy to ask her to come. 'It's too late now', she snapped, 'I've already prayed for rain.'

It is against this spirit of revenge that we find St Paul writing in another letter, the epistle to the Romans. He tells them, 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...Beloved, never avenge yourselves.'

There are vast differences between Christianity and other religions. The uniqueness of Christianity stands out boldly in the way we treat our enemies. Nikita Khrushchev, the former Premier of the Soviet Union, understood this and graphically illustrated the difference between Christianity and Communism (which by the way I would call an ideology rather than a religion) with this paraphrased remark: 'The difference between Christianity and Communism is great. When someone strikes you on the

face, you turn the other cheek. If you strike me on the face, I'll hit you so hard your head will fall off.'

Yet even in the Christian Church, the 'vigilante' spirit is alive and well. Christians sometimes attempt to sanctify their anger, calling it righteous indignation; but the fact is that we too are tempted to retaliate against those who mistreat us. Piously, we may pretend to resist evil, supposing that God is on our side as we seek to 'even the score' by causing hurt or harm to those who have mistreated us. Our text in Romans, however, calls for much more, requiring the subordination of our personal interests to those of others.

Paul tells us in verse 14 that the Christian should respond exactly the opposite from the natural man and the inclinations of the flesh. Instead of cursing, we are instructed to bless those who persecute us. Cursing and blessing are pronouncements of the mouth which address the future well-being of those to whom we are speaking. Cursing expresses our desire for harm to befall the one cursed. Blessing verbally expresses the desire for good to come to that person.

Blessing and cursing are mutually exclusive; we can do one or the other, but not both.¹ We cannot seek blessing for someone and at the same time seek his harm. God is not content to allow the Christian to merely tolerate his persecutors. We must actively desire and seek to bless our adversaries.

Paul continues and bluntly states that even in a context of hostility coming from the world that surrounds us, Christians are not to repay evil for evil.² Instead, one must give careful thought prior to any given situation, about what will show the watching world that one can hold one's head up, with nothing to be ashamed of.

¹ Cf. Ja 3. 9.

² Cf. 1 Th 5. 15.

And the same injunction is repeated a third time, when Paul states clearly that Christians are never to avenge themselves. They are not to perform acts of vengeance, or to take matters into their own hands; but rather to leave room for wrath, that is, the wrath of God. Paul reminds us that vengeance is entirely the prerogative of God. It is he alone who will decide on the punishment of the unrighteous; and he will see to it that justice is done and restored.

Instead of performing acts of vengeance in the face of injury, Paul calls Christians to show love in action. In the place of private vengeance, they are to feed their enemies who are hungry; and they are to give something to drink to their foes who are thirsty. One cannot help but be reminded of the story in the Old Testament of Elisha, who commanded the king of Israel not to kill enemies who were supernaturally delivered into his hands, but to give them a banquet. In that instance, the Syrian enemies did not return to invade Israel; and by doing this, the king of Israel ‘heaped burning coals on the enemies’ heads’.³ Paul says that the same thing will happen when we take an aggressive stance of love vis-à-vis those who have wronged us.

At first sight, it might look as if the coals of fire were themselves punishment (however metaphorical) inflicted on our enemies;⁴ but this would hardly qualify as ‘repaying evil with good’, since the vengeful intention would still be apparent. In Paul’s text, the ‘burning coals’ are almost certainly intended to refer to the burning shame of remorse for having treated someone so badly. The point that Paul is making is that treating enemies kindly is not only appropriate behaviour in its own right; it may also have the effect of turning the hearts of those who have evilly mistreated us.⁵

³ Cf. 2 Kgs 6. 8-23; Prov 25. 21-22a.

⁴ Cf. Ps 120. 3-4; Ps 140. 4-10; Joel 3. 4-7; Obad 15. Chrysostom and other Greek Fathers believed that by doing good to one’s enemies, one makes them liable to receive (eschatologically) even more severe punishment from God.

⁵ Origen, Augustine, Pelagius, Jerome and others understood Paul in a more positive sense: ‘heaping burning coals’ refers to bringing one’s enemy to the sense of shame and remorse that will lead to a change of heart.

Paul sums up this passage with another allusion to the Sermon on the Mount, and to the life of our Lord as recorded in the gospels. Yes, there *is* 'evil out there' in the world. But God's people are to meet it in the way that God met it, through his Son: with love and generous goodness. When God came to defeat evil, this was not achieved by using an even greater evil, but by using the opposite – the surprising and counter-intuitive weapons of goodness. To be consumed with vengeful thoughts, or to be led into putting such thoughts into practice, is to keep evil in circulation. The way to overthrow evil, and not to perpetuate it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead.

Amen.