

After Wendy and I were married we lived, for a number of years, in her home town which was only a short distance from Blackpool. For those of you who don't know it, Blackpool is your archetypal Victorian seaside town – the sort you often see portrayed on saucy postcards. With miles of golden sands, three piers, the most visited free tourist attraction in Europe: the Pleasure beach, it is a busy, somewhat tacky “holiday village”. Those who have to live there all year round hate the tourists, but like the money that they bring to the region. And every year you meet a new crop of tourists all of whom, it seems, are wearing the latest “amusing” T-shirts. Slogans leap out at you full of wit and humour. “Where there's a will.....there's a relative.” "Out of My Mind – Will Be Back Shortly" and "Do You Want to Talk to the Man in Charge, or to the Woman Who Knows What's Going On?"

Another I saw wasn't as funny but was pithy nonetheless: “An eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth. That way the world will end up blind and toothless”. And at first reading that is very much the idea today's gospel reading appears to use as its start point. Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament which includes this particular law that seems to justify all wars that had been fought up till that time.

Let's set the scene. The passage comes during the sermon on the mount. Now, in some ways it does not matter whether you regard Jesus as divine or not here, because in this particular passage we have the pronouncements of one of the greatest moral teachers of all time on ethical behaviour. Indeed, the fact that Jesus chooses to contradict or amplify many of the teachings of the old testament is a lesson in itself.

This particular piece that Our Lord addresses deals with revenge. It is the law of tit-for-tat and is actually found in three places in the Old Testament, but its basis goes back a long time before it was written down. It is based on the laws of King Hammurabi who formulated them in Babylon around three hundred years before Abraham left Chaldea. And it's purpose was not a cruel one but was actually a limiting one. It was designed to restrict the level of revenge and recompense that an individual could claim against someone else. So if you have stolen a loaf of bread, it is hardly equitable to cut your hand off in return. It ensured that you could not demand a repayment out of proportion with the original crime – so, one eye and not two (as an extreme example) was the *maximum* amount of recompense. It was intended to guide a judge in a law case, not as a means of individual retribution. And in all events, it was probably never applied at all.

But Jesus challenges this law. His statement is stark in the extreme – don't demand any revenge at all but, instead, love your enemies. To understand what this means we have to go back and look at war.

Wars are often fought in the name of religion. This has been the case throughout the history of mankind. Whether it be the Crusades, the Troubles in Northern Ireland or modern day terrorist battles with ISIS, religion is often blamed for the war. And yet, all of these wars are actually fought because one group of people want something that another group have got. Religion is simply an excuse to justify the war.

Some of you may have heard of Oberammergau, a German town where, every ten years a Passion play is produced. After the 2000 production the crowd went, as usual, to a small Lutheran church nearby for a united service. At the end of the service this particular day, an elderly English gentleman was seen to be coming out of the church with tears streaming down his face. When he was asked why he said it was the first time he'd ever said the ‘Our Father’ knelt beside a German. During the second world war he'd been taught to hate Germans because they were the enemy, but now, he understood that every German, whether they fought in the war or not, is his brother or sister; a child of the same heavenly Father. He knew at last what Jesus meant when he said we were to love our enemies.

Jesus command is simple: if someone injures us in any way, we should not try to fight back but should, instead, lay ourselves open to further abuse. And more. And more. Until eventually our aggressor gives up and goes away.

The law said a wronged person could demand your tunic from you but he must leave you at least your cloak so that you would keep warm at night. Jesus disagrees with this and states, instead, that you should offer your cloak as well – without waiting to be asked. A Roman soldier could demand you carry his pack a mile for him. After the mile instead of throwing it down and muttering in disgust, you ought to offer to carry it a further mile instead. And don't refuse to offer your neighbour food or tools but give them gladly.

In the 21st century, we are so familiar with these sayings of Jesus that, although they still seem hard for us to accept, are nevertheless familiar. We forget just how challenging they were at the time. They were radical. If one thing can be certain it is that Jesus was one of the most innovative moral teachers that the world has ever seen.

But we, like the Jews of 2000 years ago find his teachings impracticable and unpalatable. We (understandably) complain that if we give everything to whoever asks us, then we will wind up with nothing at all. It's an element of risk that Jesus introduces. Are we prepared to risk everything? Can we risk that an individual will not ask for everything we have or are we only prepared to give absolutely nothing. Where do we draw the line in our willingness to give?

We live in a compensation culture. Adverts bombard us that tell us that if we have an accident, we should phone comparethecomensationlawyer.com. We claim for everything – and as a result everyone's tax and insurance premiums go up. Furthermore, by claiming for everything we get into the nanny state where everyone is afraid to do anything for anyone in case something happens and we are sued as a result. We might laugh and joke about it, but when we hear stories about children being forbidden from playing bulldogs in the playground in case they get hurt, or how in Britain palm crosses are covered in flameproof coating just in case (which makes producing ashes for Ash Wednesday somewhat difficult) we realise how cosseted a society we have made for ourselves – which is precisely what Jesus was warning us about on the mount.

Jesus' view is that we stick up for other people's rights but forget about our own. That isn't going to happen tomorrow but in the meantime we must be willing to suffer, as Jesus did, for not defending ourselves. Your conscience will be clear knowing that you are not driving anyone to ruin.

Hard teaching. Hard for any of us to follow. Harder still for governments and nations to follow. But it is only when more people are willing to apply the moral teachings of Jesus, no matter what it costs, that the world will be a lot more like the kingdom of heaven than it is now. To love one's enemies makes us a bit more like God as his love is universal, indiscriminating and not reserved for his friends but is poured out for his enemies also. God made us to be like Him and that means he gave us the grace to love even our enemies just like He does. And the only way to start is to pray for them, because it's impossible to hate someone whom you have just declared to be your brother or sister.