

7th Sunday Year C

Luke 6.27-38

Peter Groves

My younger son, Edward, is seven years old, and has reached that attractive but unnerving stage where he is a sponge for factual information. His godmother Jenn bought him the perfect Christmas present – a huge book simply entitled Five Thousand Awesome Facts, and as a result I know a great deal more about aeroplanes, earthquakes and penguins, than I ever expected I would. Fortunately, he remains generous in his omniscience. When I tried to illuminate the plot of a story he was reading by telling him that 222B Baker Street was where a famous detective called Sherlock Holmes lived, he paused in thought for a moment, and then responded “That’s interesting. Because I thought it was 221B”.

One subject on which I’m still a little ahead of him is history, and so I add to the ocean of facts with recourse to dates. He often tells the time from a 24 hour clock in

the kitchen, and so when he told me it was 1838. I had to admit that off the top of my head, I couldn't come up with anything specific that had happened in 1838 – my missed opportunities included Nicholas Nickleby, the SS Great Western and the Anti-Corn Law League, but I didn't come up with the goods under pressure – and so all I had to say was that 1838 was the second year of the reign of Queen Victoria, who had come to the throne in 1837. Edward's response nothing if not direct. "Oh, well, I didn't really want to know about that."

"I didn't really want to know about that." I imagine that Christian men and women would say much the same to Our Lord about this morning's gospel. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again." Love your enemy. We are more than familiar with the

words, and less than familiar with the concept. Of course, we think that we do have that familiarity. We think that we know all about loving our enemy, and we think that because we know all about it, we know that we can't really manage to do it, however laudable a thing it might be. However much we would like to live according to the example of Our Lord, we just don't feel love towards those we identify as enemies. We can't feel positive about them, and it is dishonest to pretend that we do.

There is a certain honesty in that position, and honesty in Christian living is always better than the denial at which we Christians are so expert. But in this case, the honesty is misplaced, reflecting as it does a straightforward misunderstanding of what it might mean to love one's enemy. The problem is not the enemy, the problem is the love, our failure to comprehend it just as much as our failure to enact it.

When confronted with Jesus' command, we think about it, acknowledge our failure, perhaps pray for repentance and amendment of life, and then carry on regardless. We let ourselves off the hook because we think we have tried and failed to love our enemy. But in fact, we have not tried. We have not tried, because we have misunderstood what love means. Love is not a matter of how we feel. Love – Christian love – is not an emotion, not a physiological state of affairs by which our biochemical composition responds to the world around us. If it were, we would be correct in identifying our failure to love those who oppose and hurt us. We are correct when we say that we do not feel well disposed towards those persons, no matter how much we think we ought to. If that is what loving means, it is indeed something beyond us.

Alas, that attractive way out, signposted as it is by a bit of self-knowledge and some well-meaning self-abasement, is precisely that: a way out. It is an avoidance of Our Lord's command, rather than a failure

to live up to it. It is a refusal to engage with the task of loving, because loving is exactly that – a task. To love my enemy does not mean to feel well disposed towards that person. It does not mean performing some sort of magical vanishing act whereby my pain and my resentment towards the person who has wronged me disappears. It means loving them, and loving them means doing something, doing something loving. It is not an abstract attitude, it is a practical demand. In the messy world of human interaction, when faced with the person who irritates and frustrates and angers me, when faced with that person will I do the loving thing?

Jesus' command to his disciples is far more demanding in its context than anything with which we are likely to be faced. Love your enemy, in the gospel of Luke, means love the one who exploits and abuses you – the Roman oppressor and his minions – and the one who represents the hatred of generations – the Samaritan for the Jew. It means responding to the reality of violence, of death and despair, by doing the loving thing. None of us

should pretend that we are anywhere near that state of affairs. But neither should we pretend that we do not have our enemies, that we are not affected by the behavior of others, that we do not harbour all sorts of inner violence in our desire for the comeuppance which is simply a respectable middle class version of revenge.

Even within the New Testament itself, Jesus' words are something to twist or avoid. Paul, in Romans 12, sets out a wonderful manifesto from the great commandment, exhorting his readers and hearers to humility, kindness and forbearance in their dealings with others. "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink", says Paul, but then gives himself away by adding "for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head", one of those glorious misunderstandings of Jesus of which we are all so frequently guilty.

No. Love your enemy means just that. Love. Do something loving. Do not be diverted by feeling or emotion, by anger or pity for ourselves or for others. Do the loving thing. And if at the end of doing the loving thing you still feel that you cannot bear this person who has wronged you, well, never mind. How you feel, is not what matters. What you do, and what you have done, is what's important. As it happens, doing the loving thing has a habit – and I choose the word advisedly – a habit of making us better at loving. Practice has its uses. Love your enemy in what you say and do, and you might have fewer enemies.