

Loving your Enemies by Sarah Ashton

Gen 45 v 3-11, 15*

Luke 6 v 27 -38*

Psalms 37 v1 - 11

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be always acceptable in your sight O Lord. Amen

Please indulge me for the first few minutes of this sermon. I recently received a book in the post totally out of the blue. It is a children's story and a good friend thought it was so good I should read it to my grandchildren or use it in my next sermon. How did she know the topic was loving your enemies?

It is called *The Lamb who Came for Dinner* (Steve Smallman and Joelle Dreidemy) and it is about a wolf who is complaining that he will have to eat vegetable soup again, but he would really like lamb hotpot. At that moment a little lamb knocks on his door. The wolf readily invites the lamb in saying she is just in time for dinner. However the lamb is shivering with cold and the wolf doesn't like frozen food so he sits her by the fire to warm. Meanwhile the wolf finds the recipe for lamb hotpot. The lamb's tummy then rumbles and the wolf gives the lamb a carrot as he might get indigestion from eating a hungry lamb. The carrot gives the lamb hiccups, which concerns the wolf as he doesn't want to catch them from his meal so he tries several unsuccessful remedies and ends up putting the lamb over his shoulder and rubbing her back. The lamb snuggles in and falls asleep, which makes the wolf feel funny as he has never been hugged by his meal before and his desire to eat the lamb starts to subside. The wolf enjoys the cuddle, in fact he can't remember the last time he was cuddled. Then he sniffs her and the lamb smells delicious, maybe he could eat her quickly but the lamb wakes up and gives him a kiss 'that's not fair says the wolf, I am a big bad wolf and you are hotpot.' The wolf is in turmoil and decides the lamb will have to go. So he wraps her up warmly and sends her out on a snowy evening telling her to go away before he eats her and then they would both be sorry. The little lamb bangs on the door asking to come in, the wolf sticks his fingers in his ears and sings La La La until it is quiet. The wolf is relieved at first but then he starts to worry that she might get lost, or frozen or be eaten and now he is panicking at what he has done. He dashes out searching for her and calling

that he promises not to eat her. A sad soggy old wolf returns to his cottage alone but is delighted to see the lamb sitting by the fire. He invites her to stay and says that he couldn't eat a lamb that needed him he might get heartburn. They then settle down to a shared supper of vegetable soup.

My paraphrase may have lost some of the nuances but the message is clearly to love your enemies. Now for a real illustration.

On Epiphany Sunday John Castle asked us who we would most like to meet. My answer to this question for more years than I care to remember has been Nelson Mandela and the reason is he did show love to his enemies. He spent 27 years in prison, some of them in solitary confinement and many on Robben Island where hard labour, breaking stones and quarrying was the order of the day.

What did he do to deserve this? He was an educated man, a lawyer and he wanted to break down apartheid in South Africa. He felt that the laws were unjust and that to change them there would need to be a change of government. When he was arrested for the last time in 1963, he belonged to the African National Congress (or ANC), an organisation that carried out criminal acts to bring about awareness of the inequalities of the treatment of people in South Africa and he was arrested to prevent crime. He had been arrested many times before for acts of sabotage, but he was always strongly outspoken on non-violence. In 1963 he was arrested for plotting to overthrow the government. Despite the harsh conditions on Robben Island, Mandela managed to communicate with the outside world and world leaders started to ask for his release. Eventually a combination of international pressure, lack of foreign investment (in part due to sanctions) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (who had supported the ANC) changed the political climate in South Africa. In 1989, F W de Klerk became president of South Africa. He believed that apartheid was unsustainable in light of these changes. In February 1990 F W de Klerk released Mandela from prison at the age of 72 and legalised the ANC. Nelson Mandela gave a speech saying that he was committed to peace and reconciliation, but that the ANC and Black people reserved the right to defend themselves against apartheid. As a result of Mandela's work, the first truly democratic elections were held in South Africa in 1994. After the public elections, the National Assembly elected Nelson Mandela as the first Black President of South Africa.

I admire his struggle and his faithfulness to the cause but most of all I admire that he was never heard to complain about his time in prison or the conditions he was kept in. He was imprisoned by his enemies, but when he had power he did not seek revenge. His goal was equality for all and that was central to his dealings with all. Many people would have sought to destroy those who had inflicted such hardship on them, but the lack of reprisal or comment by Mandela is the essence of our Gospel reading today.

It tells us that we should love our enemies. Hate and revenge are not the way of the Christian. We are called to be like salt and light in a sinful world and to speak out boldly to bring people to Christ's way. When we interact with our enemies it must not be with hate and spite but out of love and compassion, the way Jesus taught us.

The Golden Rule of Christianity is in v31. 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'. Jesus tells us that we need to love everyone, those we know and those we don't know; those we like and those we don't like. This love is agape. This is the highest form of love in the bible (the others are philia which is brotherly love; eros which is sexual love; storge which is love of objects). Agape is selfless, sacrificial and unconditional. This is the love that God has for us and we should have for God and all people.

It is easy to be nice to those who are nice to us; to lend to those who we know will return our kindness. It is not so easy to show deep respect and kindness to those who hate or curse us. It can be disarming if someone strikes you to offer them the other cheek, or if they take what is not theirs to offer them more. It is not easy to just give away possessions that we have worked hard for. If we treat people with respect and love they may see God in us and change their ways. We have to be prepared to give people a chance. In our society this is not always easy. It doesn't mean that you have to give cash to beggars on the street directly but you can give through a charity ; or give them a sandwich or a meal. Our faith is not just for sharing with other Christians, our faith is for sharing in all that we do, with whoever we are with. It does not need to be explicitly said but at all times it needs to be reflected in all that we say and do. Our attitude towards and respect for others should be a mirror of Christ's teaching.

The passage goes further telling us not to judge or condemn but to forgive. Forgiveness can be hard. We can too easily hold a grudge and it eats away at us

and destroys our positive outlook and our love for others. Forgiving others does not necessarily mean that we don't want them brought to justice, it means that we dig deep in our Christian resources and show God's love that is unconditional. Forgiveness of others is central to our relationship with God. God forgives us and because we are forgiven we should forgive others. God took the ultimate step of sending his Son, Jesus to live on earth as a man and die publically and painfully on the cross that we might be forgiven. Can we not reflect God's love for us by showing forgiveness?

I return to the start of the serious section of this sermon and repeat that I would like a one to one with Nelson Mandela as to me his lack of bitterness and resentment, his ability not to judge or condemn after 27 years of harsh treatment and his drive to do what was right and bring about equality are a brilliant example of loving your enemy. If I am ever tested and need to show such forgiveness and love I pray that I have the resources within me.