

Gen 45 v 3-11, 15 Psalm 37 v 1-12 Luke 6 v 27-38

Overcoming Evil with Good written by Sarah Ashton

May my feet walk in your way Lord, may my hands do your work Lord, may my mind think of you Lord, may my heart be filled with your love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

A Christian was driving across town and irritated another driver on the road. The other driver accelerated past him, yelled some choice words, made an obscene gesture, and sped on by. Not long after, the Christian saw that same car stopped beside the road with car trouble.

What would you have done if that sequence of events happened to you? Would you have laughed at the other driver's misfortune? Would you have said a prayer or even stopped to help?

So, what did the Christian driver do? He stopped behind the other car. When the driver saw who had stopped, he feared that the driver he had treated so poorly would now treat him poorly. But this Christian man hadn't come to repay evil for evil. He came to offer help and assistance. He overcame evil with good. Stories of Good overcoming Evil are everywhere. Children are introduced to them through fairy tales, such as Cinderella, where a young girl is released from drudgery to marry the Prince and the ugly sisters get their come uppance; or the three little pigs where the bad wolf ends up in the pot on the fire. From an early age we seek to be reassured that good will win over evil. We are not saying that things won't go wrong along the way, but that good will triumph.

As Christians we have the greatest example of good overcoming evil in that Jesus died for our sins, but he didn't stay dead, He rose from the dead to overcome evil and is still with us in Spirit now. The opening paragraph of John's Gospel says 'Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it.' Jesus is our light, showing us the way for good to overcome evil.

The Old Testament has stories that the Jews were familiar with where bad things happen to people for no apparent reason but in the end it is alright. Job is a prime example of this with all his sufferings, but today's reading features

Joseph who was sold to traders, by his own brothers and then sold on as a slave in Egypt. His father was told he was dead and mourned him deeply as he was a favourite child. Joseph rose to a position of importance in Egypt through his God given ability to interpret dreams. When famine strikes his father's land, he sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain. On the first visit Joseph recognises his brothers and questions them closely and insists that they will not be helped again unless they bring their younger brother, Benjamin, with them. They have to prove their honesty to Joseph before he will reveal himself. Their father returns the silver that was sent back the first time and more with gifts of the best products of the land that he has. Later in the story, when Joseph is sure of his brothers' positive choice of lifestyle, he reveals who he is and the family is reunited. Through adversity the family come to be saved from starvation and reunited. Joseph believed that it was all in God's plan and in ch45 v8 he says that 'it was not you who sent me here but God'. Sometimes it takes time for God's plan to be worked out and no one says that the path will be smooth.

Our Gospel reading from Luke follows the Beatitudes. Jesus is teaching his chosen disciples and a large crowd. The Beatitudes talk of the rewards that will come for those who suffer material poverty and physical hunger, but they go deeper than that and refer to spiritual poverty and a hunger for righteousness. Our Gospel starts with the core of Jesus' message: to love everyone. That is easy to say but not so easy to apply. We tend to mix with people we like and build relationships where it is easy, but Jesus expects us to love everyone, including those we don't get on with and those we believe have wronged us or caused us harm. In fact, he asks us to go a step further and to do good to those who hate us. If we are hit on one cheek, rather than defending ourselves or retaliating we should offer the other cheek. If someone takes your cloak, which was the outer garment, allow him to take the tunic, which was the undergarment. He goes on to say that we should give to all who ask anything of us, and if anyone takes our possessions we should not ask for them back. These are Big Asks. v 31 then says that we should do to others as we should have them do to us, and this sounds reasonable. We should treat others the way we would like to be treated. This should be our maxim for everyday life, our Christian life.

Jesus then goes onto say that it is easy to love those who love us and to be kind or do good to those who treat us that way; or to lend money to someone whom

you expect to repay it. Even sinners can do these things. The real test for a disciple of Jesus is being able to be kind and do good deeds for those who hate them or to lend to those who they do not expect a repayment from. Jesus says that then your reward from God will be great and we will be showing God's mercy in its fullness. When in v37 we are being told not to judge other people, we are not being relieved of the need to discern right and wrong, but it is the unjust and hypocritical judging of others that is condemned.

The love Jesus is talking about is not the warm fuzzy emotional love (eros) or the love that binds families (filial) it is the unconditional love, agape. Agape is not just emotion, it is a commitment of will, it is extravagant and limitless; it is an active love based on going the extra mile. So it is not our feelings that Jesus is talking about but our actions; we must act in a way that is calculated to benefit the other person, to make that person's welfare our concern. We are human, however, and our emotions will naturally seep into our responses, but the great thing for Christians is that you don't have to do it alone. In fact, you are not expected to manage on your own. Mtt 19 v26 says 'With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible' and in Jn 15 v5 Jesus says 'Without me you can do nothing'. Paul reinforces this teaching in Philippians 4 v13 when he says 'I can do everything through Him who gives me strength'. What a comfort and strength this should be to us to know that God is with us and will help and guide us: we only have to ask. By acting with God, we will be called Children of the Most High.

We are also told that if we can live by these high standards we will be rewarded. God will return our generosity to others in greater measure. We could learn from the words of our Psalm this morning: 'Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him, do not fret when men succeed in their ways, refrain from anger and turn from wrath, do not fret, it only leads to evil. For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.'

Throughout our lives, people are going to say and do evil things that will cause us pain and hardship. Our human, sinful hearts will want to avenge these wrongs. Our human, sinful hearts will think that the best way to overcome evil is with evil. God tells us in his Word: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

This is only possible through belief and trust in Jesus who alone can deliver us from evil and who has overcome the evil of our sin. This is only possible with a God of peace whose forgiveness allows us to live at peace with him and whose peace enables us, as far as it depends on us, to live at peace with everyone.

As this is a third Sunday and a contemplative service I have three questions for you to consider

As I reflect is there a situation that I could have handled better?

How can I move forward in a more positive, Christian way?

Am I open to the prayer where I ask God to show his love through me and help me counter evil with good?