

The 7th Sunday of Year A: The Law of Love: how much of a pain is it?
1st Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2+17-18: Being “holy” = no hatred / vengeance;
2nd Reading: 1 Cor 3:16-23: We are God’s servants; so, no boasting!
Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48: Jesus’ law of love asks a lot from us.

Imagine that you are a Ukrainian soldier; your platoon has helped recapture the eastern town where you had grown up; it had been held by the Russians for six months. The place is shattered - all buildings useless. In your family’s former apartment block, you find the bodies of young women who had once been your school pals; they have been raped, then beaten to death. Your feelings are indescribable. Later, you hear an army chaplain reading parts of this Sunday’s gospel: “*I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance....love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” You think: “Whom is he trying to kid?” You walk out of the military chapel, your faith in tatters.

I know that this sounds like the start of a film – or even of a soap opera – but it does represent human emotion in the face of atrocity. Many feel that Jesus’ words this weekend are hopelessly out of touch with reality. I must admit that I too find this one of the hardest bits of his teaching to take on board.

But may I start with the Old Testament reading? This piece from Leviticus is only used on this 7th Sunday of the Year, even though it gives us a famous phrase: *You must love your neighbour as yourself*. Of course, the key is what is meant by “neighbour”. Ancient Jews tended to interpret it not just as the people next door, but still quite narrowly - people whom they knew: friends, relatives, etc. That question of its meaning was put to Jesus by a lawyer, and it caused him to give the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ in reply. However, it would never have occurred to Old Testament Jews to include ‘enemies’ in the meaning. Thus, they would have sympathised with that Ukrainian soldier, had he exacted revenge on any Russian prisoner of war. This Sunday’s section of the Book of Leviticus prohibited vengeance on neighbours, not enemies.

Jesus takes the argument to a whole new level, and immediately causes problems for those who take his words literally. I do urge you to read this gospel passage, because it highlights very clearly the difference between Jesus’ standards and those of many people in “the world”. Put simply, he disagrees with the first reading’s distinction between how we should treat “brothers & neighbours” and the rest, especially “enemies”. Jesus makes the point that his Father in heaven causes “the sun to rise on bad men as well as good, then the rain to fall on honest & dishonest men alike”. In other words, God does not distinguish between the morally good and the morally bad in everyday life. I

think most of us can see that, and accept that we should not make moral judgements on people – for example, when they need hospital treatment.

No, the problem really comes when he suggests we offer the wicked “no resistance”. To be precise, he is commenting on the phrase in the Old Testament book of Exodus *eye for eye and tooth for tooth*. This referred to the punishment a slave-owner could exact on a person who had injured his slave. It was aimed at stopping wholesale slaughter of tribes after a conflict; in other words, it allowed controlled punishment, not wild vengeance. Before we become too critical of this, we should remember that our British penal code allowed drastic physical punishments to be used on culprits up till the 1940’s. These were far worse than the ‘six of the best’ my generation got from a cane or belt at school.

Let us now face the question head-on: is it right to “offer the wicked no resistance”? No, I do not think it is. I suggest Jesus was using hyperbole – a deliberate exaggeration to make his point. He does the same later, saying that those who cause “little ones” (ie, the innocent) to sin would “be better having a millstone round their neck and drowned in the sea”. (Matt 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). This is hardly the nice and sweet Jesus seen in some of Luke’s parables, but it shows the strength of his feeling, even if it not meant to be taken literally. His point about no resistance to the wicked is that we should not stoop to their level by violent reaction; his point about “loving enemies” is not emotional love (as among families, friends, lovers, etc), but the intention to do them no harm, if they are causing no harm to us. Rather, we should care for them. This lay behind the Geneva Conventions’ treatment of prisoners-of-war.

I know that there will be some (especially pacifists) who will see my last paragraph as a cop-out. However, I suggest that a society where anyone can do anything becomes impossible. We saw this after the removal of dictators like Col Gadaffi and Saddam Hussein: nothing replaced their authority, and Libya & Iraq both descended into lawless chaos. Jesus’ very strong words in this Sunday’s gospel have caused many puzzled Christians to scratch their heads, so I think we cannot take them at face-value. Sometimes, we have to fight to defend the peaceful & innocent, but how we conduct ourselves in this struggle depends on our moral standards. For Christians, fighting is a last resort; even then, there are moral rules: once ‘enemies’ are no longer a threat, we owe them life, and support when needed. In Ukraine, that won’t be easy. *Fr Jim Dunne.*