**Sermon 7th Sunday after Epiphany 20th Feb 2022**

**Genesis 45:3-11, 154, Ps 37:1-11,40-41, 1 Corinthians 15:35-50, Luke 6:27-38**

Last week I spoke of teams and how there are two sides, as Ian would say, my team and them. I have seen him show great sportsmanship toward others, setting a good example to the younger players. But we have all witnessed times in all sorts of sports where the it would not be unusual to say that someone hated their opponent in the heat of a moment they might later regret.

Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you’. This passage follows on from the one last week concerning the Beatitudes. It would be easy to place a bracket around some passages of scripture and see them as distinct parts, but scripture does not work like that, at least not in the way I see it. In a way, it would be like taking a Sports rule book and picking and choosing which rules to follow and which ones would be better left to one side. Today might be one of those instances where the temptation might exist for us to want to skip past this passage because it confronts us, challenges us to be and to do something that is very hard to do, that is to love our enemies.

There are other words in this passage that also run counter to what our culture teaches us. ‘Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you’. So far so good. Let’s keep going. ‘If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to anyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your good, do not ask for them again’.

Over the last few weeks the Diocese has required people to do Safe Ministry Training. It comes directly as a result of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse within the church. We have a responsibility, I have a responsibility to ensure that people are kept safe from harm. This means that the kind of language we hear in our gospel today may strike us as difficult to hear and to understand. We do not tolerate people hitting or striking others. We would consider this to be abuse. But there are other kinds of abuse that we want to keep people safe from, not just physical abuse. Think for a moment what other kinds of abuse exist? Spiritual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, sexual abuse. There may well be others as well. The Wardens and Parish Council and I have a duty of care to ensure that as a Parish we provide a safe place for people to come and worship.

So what do we make of Jesus words to the disciples? These hard and difficult words to digest? Who is this God that demands of us to love our enemies, to bless them, to pray for them? What is our perception of God? Is he bigger, wiser, greater in love and compassion than we can imagine or comprehend? Is our God the one who can work beyond the impossible? Today we may say to ourselves, I can’t do that, I can’t love so and so because of… whatever it may be. I couldn’t possible bless someone who did not speak well of me. I find it hard to forgive. What I love about this passage is that it does not stop at those first few words. There are three key words that strike me as the ones that you and I can focus our energy on – Loving, Forgiving and giving back. Jesus invitation to us today is not to try to do any of these things in our own strength. You and I are invited to join with God and draw our strength from him in loving, in forgiving, in giving to those who need more.

Now I’m not saying any of this is easy. If it were easy anyone could do it. It takes courage, strength of character, but more than this if we are truly honest with ourselves. Loving and forgiving often take time, through prayer, through reflecting on what we gain from holding onto hate, holding onto bitterness or resentment.

What keeps anyone from believing that any of this is possible? That loving our enemies is possible, that forgiving those who take from us, or speak badly about us or whatever else it may be? What limitations do we place on ourselves, but also limit belief in what God can do in and through us. The prophet Micah asked, ‘Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity (sin) and passing over the transgression… [God] does not retain his anger for ever, because he delights in showing us clemency. He will again have compassion on us…. And cast all our sins into the depths of the sea’ (Micah 7:18-19).

Today’s gospel invites us to ‘be merciful, to be loving, forgiving and to give abundantly (when we are able). Jesus calls us to be that team that does not look with disdain on others who may not be with us, or like us. My hope today is that we may know God’s blessing through us and in us, in loving, forgiving and giving back. It is a call to the abundant living in the Kingdom of God. This invitation comes just one week before we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mount which falls just prior to the beginning of Lent. This point should not escape us either. Lent is an invitation to prayer, a time of reflecting on the goodness of God towards each and every one of us, on all God’s people.

Earlier I said, if any of this was easy, loving, forgiving and giving back anyone could do it. The invitation today is to draw closer to God, leaning into God’s love and compassion, so that when we need those reserves to love, to forgive and to give to others, it will come with grace and mercy. May we enter Lent knowing how great God’s love is toward each of us, how great his mercy, forgiveness and compassion. Our strategy in the kingdom of God is to be on God’s team, encouraging one another to love, in good deeds, and in compassionate living. Amen.