

Some robbers came once to a hermitage and said to the hermit, "We've come to take everything out of your cell". The hermit said, "Take whatever you see, my sons." So they took what they found in the cell, and went away. But they missed a little bag of his possessions that was hidden in a corner. The hermit picked it up, and ran after them, shouting, "My sons, you missed this; take it." They were so amazed at his patience that they returned everything, and did penance before him. They said to each other, "Truly, this is a man of God."

This story from the desert fathers, set in 4th century Egypt, exemplifies a perfect, literal fidelity to the words of Jesus in our Gospel today. Perhaps we may find the story delightful, it makes us smile. We smile because although we find this hermit utterly admirable, it would never occur to us to imitate him. Imagine for instance someone breaking into your home. You confront the robber as they are ransacking your home. Is there really an expectation from Jesus that you would help the person load up their bag with your most precious things. Do we really give up the instinct to call the police ?

Now, I absolutely *don't* want to explain away or water down any of our Lord's words. Still, the Catholic Church is faithful to the Gospel when she teaches that an

individual or nation has the right, and at times the duty, to act in self-defence against an unjust aggressor.

Do not judge, we hear Jesus say in our Gospel today. But any human society will need Judges, and a Christian can honourably fulfil that function. As for turning the other cheek: we know that Jesus Himself did not literally do that when struck during his trial (Jn 18:22), nor did His faithful disciple St. Paul, when struck by the servant of the High Priest (Acts 23:3).

So, what are we to make of the sayings in today's Gospel? Certainly, we are supposed to be disconcerted by them, astonished at them, deeply challenged by them. We should also can recognise their use of strong concrete images, according to the conventions of Semitic and Rabbinic discourse. We can accept also their heightened rhetorical effect through the use of hyperbole. To get at their authentic meaning, then, we must read them in a way that's not *merely* literal. To put that another way: we should approach the Gospel not just according to the letter, but also according to the Spirit. The law of Christ can't be confined to a set of rules or examples. Jesus doesn't ask us to live according to rules, but to have his mind in us.

So, let's take the opportunity to look at a few of the things Jesus says to us today.

Firstly and somewhat unfortunately there are 6 words in the Bible that are translated into the one English word, "love." The word used here for love, *agape* in Greek, does **NOT** mean romantic love, liking, or even friendship. What it does mean is whole-hearted, unreserved, unconditional desire for the well-being of the other. Nothing is held back. There is no hesitation. No calculation of costs and benefits. No expectation of receiving anything in return. No pay offs. There is only total desiring of the well-being of the other for their own good. This 'love' relies on an act of the will.

Oddly, this means in fact you might not actually **like** the other person. But we are called to agape them – to love them. In fact you might oppose some of their behaviours. You might speak and act against some of what they stand for. And could I say, there is a tremendous amount of comment around at the moment concerning certain political forces coming out of the United States. Yes, always as Catholics there will be a legitimate variety of personal views on these matters, but we ought not, we should not ,demonise those who disagree with us. No, Jesus says, we must agape them.

What might that look like ? It means that the way we express our disagreement, yes, even our dislike and opposition to a person, should also express our desire for their well-being.

Jesus in fact gives 3 specific suggestions for how to *agape* our enemies in our gospel today:

1. **Do good.** This means that given the opportunity we act in a civil, right and honourable way towards those we disagree with. So, if Mr Biden, or Mr Trump, or Mr Zelenski or Mr Putin, or Mr Netenyahu were to turn up at our house for afternoon tea, we would put the milk in a jug, and put the chocolate biscuits or the home baking on a nice plate.
2. **Bless.** Again, given the opportunity we ought to give praise where it is due. We should admit the other persons good qualities. This ought to inform at least part of our afternoon tea discussions, perhaps the concession to each of them that being a leader is never easy...
3. **Pray for.** And finally we ought to never cease praying for them, commending them to God, and if our dispute is a moral one, praying for their conversion.

Let's talk about exactly what Jesus was teaching when he asked that we turn the other cheek.

At the time of Jesus, those who struck you on your cheek or took away your coat were either masters or soldiers. Striking the cheek was the way a master disciplined a slave or servant; the way he asserted his authority; the way he put you back in line. And at the time of Jesus, there was a proper way to do this. You would stand facing your master, and he would strike your right cheek with the back of his right hand.

Because this was the proper way to strike the cheek, doing it any other way would be a loss of face (excuse the pun). So imagine what happens if, after having been struck on the right cheek, you stand there and silently turn your head and seemingly offer your left cheek? If you act this out, you'll see that it is not possible to strike the left cheek with the back of the right hand.

Standing there offering your left cheek actually becomes an act of resistance. Your master is unable to discipline you in the accepted fashion - his powerlessness is exposed for all to see - and with that he is shamed and dishonoured. And you have exposed the reality that master and slave are not in the right relationship, a relationship not

reflective of the Good News. In doing this you agape your master by encouraging his return to the Gospel.