



THE NEW SHOFAR

Love of our enemies is challenging as a concept, impossible to achieve without grace.

February 20th

love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you

What? Imagine how this message of Jesus must have seemed to the people listening at the time. They were a people living under a ruthless and unforgiving Roman occupation. Brutality was the main political weapon. It was one that had proved effective in keeping defeated populations quiet. How then was it even remotely possible to “love” these Romans? How could these disciples and followers of Jesus consider it likely that they would find themselves “doing good” to these hated foreigners? The normal response would have been to kill them.

**we are not
on a journey
to God,**

**we are on a
journey with
God.**

What was the existing requirement for the Jews?

The Jewish Law – the Torah – had its own take on how to react to one’s enemies...*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* That sounds as though it is a long way from the teachings of Jesus, but in fact it was a ground-breaking command. Until that was established as law, those seeking a response to some brutality were not limited in their retaliation. They could wreak all kinds of suffering on those they presumed had offended them. Kill one of my relatives and I will kill three of yours. Maim one of my animals and I will maim your whole herd. The new law limited payback to an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. It stopped an unlimited punishment being inflicted out on enemies.

This is why the teachings of Jesus were so magnificent but also so threatening and so demanding. They insisted on a radically new way of viewing the other in our lives. Hurtful actions were to be forgiven and the person I feel is offending me is to be loved. Not a limited payback, but no payback.

Jesus insists on faith transforming our entire lives

This is one of the features of the teachings of Jesus. They are absolute demands. No exceptions. They are not guidelines but divine expectations. It is where his teachings on *take up your cross and follow me* hit the tarmac and we should not think this does not apply to us. On the contrary, it is meant for all of us.

**Do all the good
you can, by all
the means you
can, in all the
ways you can, in
all the places you
can, at all the
times you can, to
all the people
you can, as long
as ever you can.**

But who are our *enemies*? If we were targets for the ire of another, victims of their moral judgment and evaluation; if we had been harmed by the words and deeds of another person, our understanding of the identity of our “enemies” would be easier to make. Our responsibility under Jesus’ new Law of Love is clear – forgive them. Not talk about them, complain about them or make secret plans to “get even” or “bring them down a peg or two”. Forgive them. Love them. No exceptions.

But are we offenders or victims?

It is so easy to think this teaching by Jesus applies to us in those occasions when we see ourselves as being victims of the words and actions of others. However, we are also adept in missing the deeper demands of this Gospel.

We are more likely to offend as perpetrators of hurt against others. Jesus is challenging us to prayerfully ponder the ways in which we make hurtful (even if we think they are accurate) judgments and moral assessments of the other in our lives. We confidently and confidentially say to someone else “that person is”. There, in that moment, with that observation, we have judged and condemned someone, a child of God, a man or a woman loved and cherished by God. The Bible rightly condemns this kind of activity as being sinful “gossip”. It is aimed at another and is morally evil.

**Whenever
you are
confronted
with an
opponent,
conquer him
with love
(Mahatma
Gandhi)**

**Run after the
hurting, go
after the
broken, the
addicted, those
who are
struggling with
the challenges
of mental
health issues,
those society
has written
off. Go after
them with
love, with
mercy, with
the goodness of
God, for that is
the way Jesus
lived.**

Love your enemies and to good

This is where we can find a significant difficulty with the love commandment. It does not demand an occasional act of love, of kindness and charity. It requires a realignment of our entire lives, a reshaping of the way we usually act, so that it is love that emanates out of us and flows over into the blighted lives of those the world “hates”, those we dare to assess morally.

This love of which Jesus speaks is an outflowing love, a love that initiates a relationship with those who are hurting, who are being maligned and judged by others. He is not talking about a love we have for those with whom we have a bond. Our friends and family. Not primarily anyway. That is not much of a challenge. It is easy to love our friends.

The love demanded in the Gospel is the love Jesus has for us. As St Paul writes, it was *while we were still sinners that he came and died on the cross for us*. He did not wait until we were perfect or deserving of healing. He died for sinners and on the cross, among his final words to his murderers were...*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*. That must be our starting presumption when we speak of others and presume to be in a position to assess and judge them – a love presumption. Search for the good in them, forgive what we presume to be sin in their words and deeds and above all else love them.