

23rd February, 2014.

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 3: 10 – 23
Matthew 5: 38 – 48**

Sermon: Verbal Harassment

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

It just runs of the tongue doesn't it? It's so easy to say particularly when we live in a country where we are not persecuted or at least, allegedly not persecuted.

In one article that I read, persecution is described as anything from verbal harassment to hanging. There's quite a difference in the forms that persecution can take, but hanging, although it is an extreme form of persecution, hanging is over relatively quickly unlike verbal harassment which can go on for years.

Think of the battered wife or the battered husband, for that matter. The abuse, the verbal harassment is unending and it is torturous. Verbal harassment wears people down. It breaks their spirit in the end, or it can, and yet it is something that Christians suffer in our own country and even in our own community to varying degrees.

That might come as a surprise but you know, all the muttering that goes on behind the scenes, all the backstabbing that goes on, all the comments that allegedly unnamed people are making, you know the kind of thing, 'people are saying', all of that is a form of persecution because it wears people down. It eats away at people and it can cause friction and unpleasantness.

Verbal harassment is not just unpleasant, it is also dangerous because in some instances, the battered wife will snap and will turn on her husband and stab him to death. Verbal harassment can have dire consequences for individuals. Teenagers take their own lives because of verbal harassment on facebook or via texting. Verbal harassment is so destructive that if we took time to think before we speak, we might actually break a habit of abuse.

Equally, instead of fuelling the fire of persecution by taking part in the slander or the criticism, we could dampen the flames by suggesting a different approach, by suggesting a peaceful approach or a more loving approach to others, maybe even communicating with each other, speaking to each other. Love your enemies is what Jesus advocates.

But as Jesus said, it's easy to love those who are our friends, those who support us, those who go the extra mile. That's no great achievement. Anyone can love those who are their friends.

The challenge comes in Jesus' words to love our enemies. But what is an enemy? Wikipedia says that the word 'enemy' is derived from the Latin for 'bad friend'. That's interesting, isn't it? If only we could see our so called enemies as no more than bad friends what a difference that might make to life.

The word enemy is a strong word that is associated with all sorts of emotions such as anger, hatred, frustration, jealousy, fear and distrust.

As a political concept, an enemy is likely to be met with hate, with violence, with battles and wars. We only need to look on our TV screens to see the consequences of that stance. As soon as we use the word enemy, we feel threatened in some way and that causes a response that we might not otherwise have had.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. On reading that verse again, I saw that there was a distinction being made between those who are our enemies and those who persecute us. They may not always be the same people. Those who persecute us may not always be our enemies but simply those who in some way feel threatened by us or by our actions and sadly when people feel threatened, attack can seem the best form of defence.

Jesus' call to us is not to attack, not to retaliate but to pray for those who persecute us, to pray for those who feel threatened, not to turn them into enemies because that is a very dangerous road to go down. That is the one that leads to all out war.

Prayer is a peaceful response and one which gives us the opportunity to seek a peaceful way forward. Our call is to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

We all have a long way to go. None of us is yet perfect. Does that give us an excuse when we condemn each other? Does that mean that we can get away with persecuting each other by our words or by slating each other? Does that mean that we can go all out to destroy someone or the work that someone is doing? Surely not.

I mentioned a moment ago that perhaps communication could be used to dampen the flames. Communication is a tool which can build up and tear down. Communication can be used by us or abused by us. It can benefit society or it can destroy society. The Nazis communicated with the people of Germany. Communication can be used for propaganda so that people take sides but all that form of communication does is create ill feeling and enemies and wars. Communication can be abused.

But good communication involves listening to others and being heard by others and it can avoid divisions and it can bring about peace and a sense of

well being. How we choose to use communication is up to us but communication only works when both parties are willing to listen and when both parties are heard.

Two people who listen to each other may in the end agree to differ but each one should have an understanding in the end of where the other is coming from and of what is behind the opinions and the feelings which are expressed. That in itself can lead to a peaceful way forward if not a resolving of the problem which is around.

At the end of the day, we are all human. We are called to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect but we are not yet perfect. As we are, we are called to build on the foundation which is Christ. We are not asked to create our own building. We are asked to build the one for which Christ is the foundation.

The way the building goes up, the work that is done, may not please everyone but unless everyone looks at the design and discusses the proposals and suggests viable alternatives, the building will go up as planned. The only other thing that can happen is that the work stops altogether but that has consequences. Those you can work out for yourselves.

So what part are you and me going to play in building on the foundation which is Christ? Are you and I going to be one of the people who chips away at the building until the work that others are doing crumbles around us or are you and I going to take a genuine interest in how we build on the foundation of Christ and communicate our ideas and our opinions while being willing to listen to others who may think differently from us. At the end of the day, do we want to be want to be good friends or bad friends because how we answer that question will influence the part we choose to play in building on the foundation which is Christ. How we answer that question will influence how we serve our God.