

THE EMMAUS SERIES

7th Sunday, Year A

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 17-18

1 Corinthians 3: 16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

The teachings of Jesus in this gospel are those most people remember from the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Understanding them can help us better appreciate Jesus' charter of the Kingdom.

Jesus quotes the law of retribution common in ancient societies: 'an eye for an eye'. This law of commensurate retribution was a distinct advance on the endless feuding of barbarian societies. The New Law of Jesus does not do away with the human laws which are essential to human society; it adds a new dimension to the enactment of their provisions – a dimension that will foster a society that is more life-giving. Jesus teaches that the provisions of strict justice are not enough to foster the healthy human community of God's designs for the human family. We see this verified when those in authority rely on more and more legislation to create a good society – without good will such laws only bring resentment.

When Jesus says, 'Offer the wicked man no resistance', he is not saying that we should never defend ourselves and seek justice when we are wronged. Matthew is applying these words to persecutions suffered by the Jewish converts of his community; but they have far wider implications. If hatred is contagious, so too is good will. Jesus forgave his enemies; Stephen, the first martyr, followed his example; the attitudes of the early Christian martyrs embarrassed and challenged the imperial authorities. The selfless response of the followers of Jesus has released a new force in the world's history. It was the teaching of Jesus that inspired Ghandi's program of non-violent resistance, and the heroic leadership of Martin Luther King.

However it must be understood that Jesus does not outlaw organised resistance to injustice; he is pointing to what will often prove a better way. It has been suggested that the examples provided by Jesus, bringing us back to our common experience, were recommendations concerning the attitude God's people should have under the Roman occupation – they should give up their hopes of an earthly triumph; and if they put aside their resentment and antagonism and witnessed to the ways to God by showing good will and cooperation to the occupying power, they would fulfil their call to be 'a light to the nations'. Certainly, as the last section of today's gospel shows, the charter of Jesus is a call to learn and identify with the generous and merciful ways of God, the Father in Heaven who cares for 'bad men as well as good'.

John Thornhill sm