

Loving One's Enemies: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 26th December 2021 (St Stephen's Day)

Readings – Acts 7: 51–60, Matthew 10: 17–22

Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'

Some of you will have heard the news that Archbishop Desmond Tutu died earlier this morning at the age of 90. Most of us would agree that Desmond was the greatest saint produced by Anglicanism in our lifetimes. It is appropriate that he died on the feast of Stephen, because both declared Christ's teachings of non-retaliation most powerfully in their lives.

Non-retaliation isn't the passive acceptance of being persecuted or discriminated against. Instead that it accepts that injustice can never be undone on its own terms. We know that there is both darkness and light in each of us. We know that once we say that the end justifies any means, then the line between victim and victimiser starts to become dangerously blurred.

But both Saint Stephen and Desmond Tutu went beyond merely refusing to be silenced in the face of oppression, and in doing so, lived out one of the most challenging and most rewarding of Christ's teachings. Let me explain. Many of Christ's moral teachings were the same as those of other great teachers and philosophers of the ancient world. Some form of the golden rule, to do to others as you would have them do unto you, is seen in the teachings of Buddha, and Zoroaster, and Greek philosophy.

There is one teaching of Christ that was absolutely unique, however. It is the most revolutionary of Christ's teachings and the one which is hardest to follow; I certainly don't manage to put it into practice very often. That is his command to love our enemies. Remember, that the command is not, absolutely not, as the lives of both Stephen and Desmond show us, to acquiesce in the evil that our enemies do to us – but to love them, to love them enough to recognise their humanity. To love them enough to recognise that we may be the only agents

God has to rescue them from the darkness that consumes them. To love our enemies is to understand that our response to their persecution may be what brings out the image of God that is stamped in each of them and enables them to turn from evil.

It is a wonderful teaching. Let me reiterate, I'm not pretending it's easy to live out in practice. But Desmond Tutu's life and Stephen's show us that in the saints of the church, we have examples to follow of how to respond to persecution not in its own terms, but in refusing the twin dangers of both acquiescence and of hate.

There is something else in loving the enemy: that is that in doing so we recognise our enemies' humanity. To liberate others, to be agents of Christ's good news in the world, we must recognise that there are dark sides to our own character. These the tares that God leaves to grow along with the wheat, things in the wrong circumstances could indeed become monstrous.

Every tyranny in history has seen few people resist, and many acquiesce in things that they knew were wrong, and no small number of people embrace the opportunity to live out the darkest passions of their soul. One reason why I am sceptical about revolutions, political or otherwise, is that they are often lost before they have been won, precisely because the liberators of today always show aspects of their character that inevitably lead them to becoming the persecutors of tomorrow. In persisting in love our enemies, we walk with Jesus Christ in the hope that His grace will prevent us from ever turning into them. To help build a better world, we must be brutally honest with ourselves about the ways in which, without God's grace, we might help make it a worse one.

For example, in societies like ours, persecution is not something most of us have to consider; but some Christians seem to need to play the martyr every time somebody disagrees with them, perhaps needing to be more important than they actually are. A truly Christian political system would still need to confront the reality that some people are self-important, egotistical, and seem determined to try to silence anyone who disagrees with them.

Yet while we hear Christ's prophecy of persecutions today's Gospel from our position of safety, other Christians still live in the same sort of situation as Stephen. In dozens of countries, people martyred for their Christian faith today, or persecuted, or discriminated against, or forced to worship in secret. Pray that St Stephen will be with those who, like him, will die for their faith today, in the prison camps of North Korea, or at the hands of extremists in the Islamic world, or at the hands of criminal gangs in Latin America who despise their unwillingness to collude with corruption. Do inform yourself – and there are many sources of information – about where Christians suffering for their faith and how you can help them. Do not underestimate the influence you can have.

Our MP is usually very keen to engage on these issues in my experience, and has more direct channels of contact with, for example, the Foreign Office, than we do.

Desmond Tutu endured many persecutions in the 1980s. Indeed, this has been the subject of some of my academic research, and I have little doubt that he would have been subject to lengthy imprisonment and very possibly assassination by the *apartheid* régime except that Pretoria knew full well that the eyes of the world were upon it. In particular, the Church of England repeatedly sent bishops and senior clergy to South Africa at the request of the Church there to be present with Desmond, or with other Christians at risk of abuse by the state, or at trials in court, to ensure that the *apartheid* state knew that to do so would risk a damaging international backlash, much of it generated by Christians. What we did for Desmond and South African Christians a generation ago, we can do for others today.

So let me finish with a prayer of Desmond's

Goodness is stronger than evil;

Love is stronger than hate;

Light is stronger than darkness;

Life is stronger than death;

Victory is ours through Him who loves us. Amen.