

Talk-1

Matthew 5:38-42

Have you noticed how language evolves? Covid-19 has made us all fluent in Corona-speak. We now know all about '*social-distancing*' and '*shielding*'. Maybe, whilst the '*R number*' was above 1, you were '*furloughed*'. Did it feel more like a '*Coronacation*' (annual leave whilst on lock-down)? How did you deal with '*Coviiodts*' (people who behave irresponsibly during the lockdown)?

How long will it be before future generations use these phrases without realising where they came from?

That's the same with phrases like:

- 'Turn the other cheek'
- 'Sue the shirt off your back'
- 'Go the extra mile'

We all use them. But where did they come? And what did they originally mean?

Two thousand years ago Jesus was speaking to those who lived under oppression. The Roman Empire, the world's only Super Power of its day, had invaded. Its formidable army had marched in, conquered the land, and was plundering its wealth to further strengthen its Empire. That's what Empires do. Those who do the invading are usually pretty pleased with themselves. It feels very different if you're the one being invaded.

Back then there were broadly four groups that opposed the Roman invaders, each with very different strategies for dealing with this unwanted Empire: Pharisees; Sadducees; Zealots; Essenes.

The Pharisees saw themselves as the *religious elite*. Meaning 'set apart' /separate (at least from Gentiles - all those that weren't Jewish - and anyone else who disagreed with them.) The Pharisees' solution was to not let the Roman Empire become a "distraction" - just concentrate on becoming more.. religious.

The Sadducees saw themselves as the *political and social elite*. They believed, being descended from Zadok, King David's High Priest, meant they were *entitled* to hold positions of power. They might have liked all the pomp and privilege but inside they were spiritually dead. They didn't really believe it. The Sadducees' solution was to collude with the Roman Empire. If you can't beat them, join them.

The Zealots saw themselves as the *military elite*. They were leading a guerrilla war against the Roman Empire. Hopelessly out-numbered and ill-equipped, they stood little chance against the might of the Roman Army. Jesus had included a Zealot, Simon the Zealot, in His Twelve. How did Simon react to Jesus's teaching about love, peace and non-violent resistance? Was it Simon the Zealot that stirred up James and John to 'go nuclear' and call down fire from heaven, on the Samaritan village that hadn't welcomed Jesus? The Zealots' solution was to kill as many Romans as possible.

The Essenes saw themselves as the *spiritual elite*. They rejected the idea of violence. To be honest, they rejected almost anything and everything. Life is complicated, tough, so run for the hills. They didn't want to be tainted by 'real life'. The Essenes solution was to withdraw.

So, what was Jesus's Way?

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'" v.38

Recognising the mess that humans were making of life, and to bring some much-needed consistency, proportionality and fairness, Moses had introduced the Law. At least make it an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" If someone hits you, go no further than hitting them back. If they insult you, you insult them. If they launch a nuclear missile strike, you launch a nuclear missile strike.

It's mad, literally MAD - Mutually Assured Destruction - it's what nuclear warfare is based on. One UK submarine carrying 40+ separate nuclear warheads can wipe out 40+ cities somewhere else in the world. But before those missiles have landed, others have fired their nuclear missiles at us. And then, it's good night world. The end of the planet. An 'eye for an eye', then becomes an 'island for an island', a 'nation for a nation'.

Jesus understood the logic but could see how this was only a part-solution. So, He went further:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth BUT I tell you, do not resist an evil person.'" v.39

Jesus was not saying, be like the Essenes and run away or be like the Pharisees and explain it away. And definitely don't be like the Zealots and fire away.

Instead, He was saying, follow MY way, God's Way - *Kingdom*, not *Empire*. And that Way was to: turn the other cheek; let some take the shirt off your back; and go the extra mile.

But What did Jesus mean?

“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” v.39

To understand this, we need to know a bit about Roman life.

First, Romans used a back-handed slap as a deeply insulting put down. You only back-hand slap someone you wanted to put down as inferior to you. Slave masters would do this to their slaves.

If a Roman got into dispute with another Roman, no matter how bad it got, they would never back-hand slap the other. As a fellow Roman citizens, they were your equal. Instead, if they had to use violence, they would punch. You punched your equal, you back-hand slapped your inferior.

Of course, if a slave fought back, they would be killed/ disposed of.

Second, with no toilet paper (remember 18 months ago?), 2,000 years ago you always used your left hand to *[whistles as wipes bottom with left hand]* so you were free to use your right hand for everything else. It was so part of your life, you did it without thinking. If someone threw you a ball, you didn't have to pause and think, what hand should I use. Your default reaction was always to use your right hand.

So, Jesus was saying, if a Roman soldier - an Agent of Empire - insults you by back-hand slapping you in the face - to convey that you are less than human, not their equal made in the image of God - then don't sink to their level and use violence. (In any case, with such an in-balance of power, nothing would change.)

But neither should you accept it, don't give in to oppression. Have courage and resist Empire. Turn the other cheek. You've back-hand slapped me and I'm still here. So now punch me. In other words, treat me like your equal. It was resistance - without sinking to their level. Non-violent resistance.

“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.” v.40

The poor often only had two garments - their outer, daytime, wear (their cloak) and their inner, night wear (their undergarment).

Deuteronomy 24 said, if someone is so poor and asks for a loan, and literally all that they can offer by way of loan guarantee is the clothes they're standing in, and IF you go ahead and take their coat, at least return it to them every night so that they have something to sleep in. This was clever, because few would do this because who would want to be known for reducing a poor person down to their undergarment?

But if someone tries to pretend they're ethical by taking your underwear - so it appears everything is OK, when really, the assets have been quietly

stripped – Jesus says, go ‘full monty’. You’ve taken my undergarment, here, have my coat too. By going naked, you’ll heap shame on your oppressor. It will be they who are exposed, shamed, for being the oppressor.

*“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles”
v.41*

The Roman Army was formidable. They were able to move quickly into areas to crush local rebellions. It was all about the projection of power. You didn’t just defeat your enemy, you utterly *crushed, humiliated* them. Once they felt totally broken, then you could keep on top of them despite being totally out-numbered by the local population. The Roman Army would remind local people just how broken they were by making them carry their heavy packs for a mile.

Jesus says, if a Roman Centurion makes you carry his heavy back pack one mile, show him, the agent of Empire, that you are not broken– carry it two miles, more if necessary. It will humiliate your oppressor.

Jesus was calling for radical non-violent resistance. In the face of oppression, neither give in nor use violence. Resist evil, but use your brain, not your Braun, your head, not your fists.

It was Jesus’ *Kingdom, not Empire* than inspired Mohandas Gandhi in his non-violent resistance movement that drove out Empire – the British Empire – from India.

Likewise, it was Jesus’ radical non-violent resistance that inspired Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Baptist Minister and leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. We all know how he challenged the legacy of Empire built on slavery and oppression, with its segregation based on skin pigmentation.

The uncomfortable truth is that Empire isn’t just what the Romans did. It’s what the British Empire did too. We in Britain invaded other countries, subduing and exploiting them for their gold, minerals and spices. It’s no coincidence that Colonial countries like Britain are wealthier today than the countries they/ we invaded.

We are called to join Jesus in His radical non-violent resistance movement. To resist oppression, ill-treatment.

And oppression is everywhere. It’s:

- bullying in the workplace
- economic systems that structurally favour the few at the expense of the many
- sexist banter that devalues women as somehow inferior to men
- homophobic jibes that deny how someone is wired

- racist stereotyping that sees people as “other”, “not like us”

And it's why:

- Unemployment is twice as high for those from ethnic minorities
- Black workers with degrees earn 23 per cent less on average than White workers
- The rate of school exclusions is three times as high for children & young people of colour

None of this is just. It is positively unjust. It reveals there are numerous structural injustices embedded into the fabric of our society – the way we do things. The legacy of Empire is *everywhere*.

And if you are privileged not to have experienced it, not to be ill-treated because of your gender, sexuality, or skin colour, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It just means you are privileged.

Jesus calls us to resist oppression, racism. To be allies, to pursue *Kingdom, not Empire*. This is the Jesus Way. If you want the Way, the Truth and the Life, join the resistance movement. Because that's where you'll find Jesus.

But it's *non-violent* resistance. 'Turning the other cheek' has nothing to do with backing down or passively surrendering. It takes courage and belief and respect for life.

We're on a journey with this, as a nation and as a City; but also as a Church. We need to be listening to one another, hearing each other's stories, learning/ educating ourselves, including about the Colonial history that's too often air-brushed out.

We'll get it wrong. We'll at times say the wrong thing. We'll even sometimes offend one another. We've all done it! But it's only by doing this, in the Spirit of Christ, that we'll discover what it means to be *Kingdom, not Empire*.

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