

Mt 5

It's not been an easy week for oppressive dictators. Egypt, Libya, Bahrain. The whole region appears in turmoil at the moment, and in the middle of it all, the United States have used their power of veto to oppose a resolution of the UN security council, for the 10th time since 2001, 9 of which have been used to back the Israeli side in the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

No one, of course, has any idea how any of this is going to work its way out. The whole of the Middle East and stretches of North Africa seem to be in a state of utter turmoil. The whole world is on fire.

This is precisely the kind of setting in which Jesus is speaking in the sermon on the Mount. I'm not sure how you might picture the sermon on the mount. I've lost count of the number of times Jesus is taken as giving calm, sensible guidance for life to a gathering of middle class church folk who just want to be better people.

Preaching in first century Israel was not like preaching in a twenty first century Baptist church. I suspect the sermons may have been a bit different. And the congregations would probably have been even more dangerous than this one. (Although one of my sons was explaining to me on Friday, that Samson had a big battle with the Phillipinos).

You only have to think properly about the moral guidance Jesus is offering here, to realise this is not a sermon carefully crafted to taylor to the felt needs of unchurched Harry and Mary. This is not Jesus being culturally sensitive, drawing illustrations from every day life to challenge people to be holier. He is not offering a clever presentation of the gospel in relevant terms for the target audience.

Jesus is addressing people in anguish and turmoil. You only have to read the sermon to know that the context is one of utter violence: an eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth! We use that phrase so often, - and yes, we salute Gandhi's point about an eye for an eye making the world blind. But how often do you stop and picture the bloody mess, the screams and the agony of an eye being taken! And eye for an eye.

Or even just being slapped in the face! It's a violent picture. Or a soldier demanding the shirt from of your back because he is legally entitled to it. And that same soldier – a horrible pagan representative of the hostile regime – forcing you to carry his pack for a mile. The context of the sermon on the Mount – is one of violence and oppression – and what it means for people living under these yokes to live in freedom. In fact, he is telling them to be perfect.

Historically, there have been great debates over the question of whether it is possible to be perfect, because how can you be perfect when you're a human being and you are marred by sin? But it seems to me clear, that Jesus is calling for something very specific...

These people are being physically, emotionally, spiritually dehumanised. And the temptation can all too easily be, to think – well, look – we are suffering this injustice, we are putting up with these atrocities – surely that justifies us in resorting to tactics and behaviour we wouldn't otherwise consider. If nasty people are doing these nasty things to you – you want to stop it happening, and the most effective way will be to do nasty things back.

If this is done by people without official power we call it violent protests or terrorism. If it is done by those in power, we call it retributive justice and national security. And of course, if the clash is between those two groups, the mess is likely to be a bloody one!

That's exactly what it was in Jesus' day. In Luke's version of this sermon, Jesus even uses the example explicitly, referring to an incident where Galilean worshippers were slaughtered by Roman troops. And that wasn't the first or the last time Pilate slaughtered those he considered politically dangerous opponents.

Of course, in the comfort of our living room, we might look at these protests – at people lining streets and filling squares and burning flags and damaging property – that we wouldn't do that here in Britain... it's not sunny enough. But if you know what it is to be bullied, if you know what it is to be mistreated, to be harassed, if you've seen members of your family suffer at the hands of others, maybe you would behave differently.

Can you imagine then, the law of an eye for an eye being taken seriously by those who understand well enough the violent and bloody nature of that image and the reality?

It would be perfectly natural and acceptable to engage in acts of violence. That, after all, is what fills our cinema screens most of the time. It's what I've heard Ruth describe as the myth of redemptive violence – using violent measures against the perpetrators of violence in order to bring freedom and justice. It's a popular story line, and we consider those who win to be heroes. And now, try to imagine again, what Jesus means – speaking to these oppressed people, what Jesus means by calling people to be perfect, or – alternatively – to be fulfilled, complete.

That perfection, that fulfilment, that completion – is never going to come to those who fight violence with violence, to those who slowly and unwittingly become the very monster that crushed them. This, it seems to me, is one of the lessons of history – including modern history: that all-too-often, the persecuted or oppressed people of one generation, become the persecutors and oppressors of the next. An eye for an eye makes the world blind

But Jesus is not addressing the UN security council. He is speaking to peasants on a hillside. He is addressing people who know what it is to be wronged. And what is Jesus saying to them? The assumption was that as long as oppression and injustice remained in place, it was impossible for them to worship God. But God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Not that this is a God who says – oh it's okay, there is evil and injustice in the world, but never mind. Jesus is calling for the evil practices to be undermined by over-complying with them. It's been said here before, that to turn the other cheek upon a Roman soldier was inviting him to slap you with the palm of his hand rather than the back of his hand, and he cannot slap you with his palm without considering you an equal. If you're called to carry the soldier's pack for a mile: don't break the law by refusing, but equally, don't comply with the law by obeying. Instead, exceed the law by going over and above what is required – saying that you as a person are better than the law that you are expected to obey. It makes the oppressive laws pointless.

For Jesus, you don't have to fix the world before you can experience Shalom.

