

In this morning's Gospel Jesus addresses the roles of **victim** and **perpetrator**, which acknowledges that we all find ourselves in both of those roles at one time or another.

This passage could be seen as a code of conduct for times of conflict. But as such, it comes with some major difficulties. The obvious problem is that there are details which are so specific to the culture of Jesus' day which – without proper interpretation – leads to deeply flawed understandings.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth sounds like a sure fire way to a blind and denture-ridden society. Interestingly, this rule in the law of Moses was designed to **limit** retaliation so that it did not exceed the original injury, leading to greater escalation.

Yet Jesus tackles this law and calls his followers to a non-violent standard: "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Less violence is good. Yet many generations have understood Jesus as advocating a **doormat mentality** that maintains victimhood.

This passage has kept good people in violent and abusive relationships because they believed it was their Christian duty to stand there and take it. Not only is this interpretation dangerous, it utterly misses the point.

Marjorie Thompson provides the crucial background.

Notice that Jesus **specifies a situation** where a person has been struck on the **right cheek**. This would require the perpetrator to strike with the palm of the **left hand**, which was used for unclean tasks including striking a person considered **inferior**. Turning the **left cheek** invites the perpetrator to strike with the palm of the **right hand**, which signifies that the one struck is an equal or worthy opponent. Far from making oneself a grovelling doormat, the choice to turn the other cheek represents an assertion of non-violent power and self-respect, ...¹

The act of turning the left cheek demands that the victim's humanity be acknowledged by the perpetrator. By this rendering, turning the other cheek is an act of power, not submissiveness. It is a way of claiming our identity

¹ Marjorie Thompson, *Companions in Christ, The Way of Forgiveness*,

as one made in the image of God.
And it utterly changes the dynamic.

The passage then moves from how we are to respond to those who would abuse us, to how we are to respond to those we would heap abuse upon.

The standard here is the same.
Just as we are to assert our own identity as one beloved of God when we are the victim, we are to do likewise as the perpetrator.
Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translates Jesus words, thus:

I'm telling you to love your enemies.
Let them bring out the **best** in you,
not the worst.
When someone gives you a hard time,
respond with the energies of prayer,
for then you are working out of
your true selves, your God-created selves.

Or as the Obamas would say
"When they go low, we go high."

Notice that Jesus doesn't suggest that we **ought not** have any enemies.
He is not asking that we cease to be human.

² *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*

But instead of demonising, minimizing and blaming our enemies, Jesus calls us to choose to respond with love and with prayer.

On first hearing, this injunction to love our enemies, to pray for those who curse us sounds like a dreadfully heavy burden.

But as Stephanie Dowrick notes,
"It restores us to something that is always within us but from which we have become unbound: a sense of unity expressed through the qualities of trust, faith, hope and love."²

I heard an extraordinary example of this on the radio this week³.
Neuroscientist Professor Richard Davidson was interviewed about his study of the brains of Buddhist monks, while they performed a traditional **Compassion Meditation**.

This had come about as the result of an encounter with the Dalai Lama who challenged Davidson, noting that all the tools of modern neuroscience had been used to study anxiety and depression

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3csyx39>

and they should also be deployed to study **kindness** and **compassion**.

So Professor Davidson fitted 20 monks with more than 250 sensors which measured their brain activity during 1 minute of compassion meditation and 30 seconds neutral resting period.

The compassion meditation was described like this. They would extend compassionate thoughts such as:
May you be well. May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be free from suffering.
Beginning with people they already loved, they would move to themselves, strangers and finally to people they found challenging. Sounds a lot like praying for your enemies if you ask me.

The results of the study were astonishing. Their brains evidenced high frequency electrical activity (called Gamma Oscillations) which usually show up in those rare 'aha' moments we experience. Gamma Oscillations demonstrate increased connectivity across widespread regions of the brain. Everything clicks into place.

Typically Gamma Oscillations last for less than one second in the average brain. But in the monks they were lasting for minutes. Even when in their neutral resting period these Gamma Oscillations were being exhibited.

The discipline of compassion meditation had actually changed the brains of the monks.

That gave them a greater ability to focus, and fewer "sticky" emotions (those negative emotions that remain with us long after the event that has caused them).

Professor Davidson's study went on to show that two weeks of 30 minutes daily compassion meditation was sufficient to improve altruistic attitudes.

To pray for our enemies is not just good for our enemies. It is also good for us.

To love our enemies to pray for those who persecute us acknowledges that the person whom we would call an **enemy** is actually a child of God, just as we are.

To respond with love and prayer is perhaps the only thing that will prevent us from becoming an abuser and creating another victim. And it might just change our brain chemistry while we're at it.

Having profoundly re-framed the human dynamic of conflict, Jesus throws in just one more tiny little demand: "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."

Oh good. Finally, something achievable!! But the perfection Jesus calls us to is not a pinched, legalistic dotting of I's and crossing of T's.

Rather, he points, to a deep wholeness
in the human spirit.

A wholeness that God seeks for us all.

A wholeness that is the outworking of
a life lived intentionally in God's company.

Turn the other cheek:
claim your identity.

Pray for those who curse you:
you'll be doing yourself and them a favour.

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect:
dwell in the deep wholeness God calls you to.

In the name of the Trinity of Love
God in community, holy, and one.
Amen.