

Reflection Wednesday 9th February.

Matthew 5:38-42

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

I have combined two days reading from the prayer manual for today’s reflection.

I am grateful to the Rev. David Wynd for helping me look at these verses in a different way within their context.

Jesus calls on us to rethink many areas of life. Here he is causing his initial listeners to think again and in so doing we are to follow suit. He was talking to people who lived under a repressive occupying force.

At the heart of what Jesus is saying in these verses is not for us to be walked over by others who are aggressors but to challenge the aggressor to think again their actions in the light of our reaction to them.

If the aggressor was to strike one cheek, Jesus says, to turn the other; this makes the aggressor, in shock, think about what they have done and are doing.

As we read about a cloak being demanded and a coat being given in addition it may seem that we are called to be generous. That is how we who have many clothes may see it in relation to a person asking for a cup of tea, to whom we can also give a sandwich as well. This though comes out in the next verse in response to giving to the one who begs and seeks to borrow. (This may well be something to be reflected upon separately in a society very different to that of Jesus’ day where state benefits were not in existence.)

This is not the scenario Jesus is speaking of. He is speaking of an aggressor asking for a debt to be repaid. The passage properly translated is of a cloak and an undergarment, all that a person would wear. The aggressor would be greatly embarrassed at leaving someone naked, even more so than the naked soul before him.

In the time of Jesus the Roman soldier, the occupying force, could order a citizen to walk one mile carrying their load. The soldier would be shaken by the willingness of one willing to walk the second mile.

Jesus is giving guidance not in submission but in non-violent protest; actions that cause the aggressor to think again about what they are doing and how they are treating another human being.

Such action can help the oppressed reclaim their freedom by volunteering, freely an action in response to a demand in so doing taking back control Jesus was living amongst an oppressed people who were seeking freedom. The way of violence was what was expected; the way of violence was seen as the way of the coming Messiah.

The one standing before them was the Messiah, the Saviour, the liberator, the one whose protest was a self-chosen peaceful surrender; a protest that did lead to his death but then to resurrection and the ultimate defeat of evil.

Martin Luther King and Gandhi took forward the way of non-violent protest in the 20th Century, How do we seek to overcome our oppressors? How do we seek to stand up for the oppressed and to offer hope of liberty?