

## **Sermon – Luke 6.27-38**

Commit your way to the Lord: trust him, and he will act. Amen.

On Thursday I received the news of Ivan Fairchild's peaceful release from this life, surrounded by his children, into the loving arms of God, and we are now in the thick of funeral planning, amongst everything else that is going on. Most people in this parish knew Ivan and Joan who were stalwart members of the Little River community and, as I've had conversations with friends and relatives about them, it's become clear to me that they were people of generosity and warmth, people who lived out that golden rule: do to others as you would have them do to you. And this observation leads us straight into our Gospel reading today.

Last week, we had the scene setting for Jesus' first sermon in his public ministry in northern Israel, around the Galilee, where he grew up. Jesus is preaching on the plain, surrounded by rings of people: his inner cohort of twelve, his broader group of disciples and the larger mass of people from all over who have come to hear him, be healed by him and even be saved by him. There is a power about him. And the first part of his sermon is radical. He is saying blessed are the poor, the hungry and the reviled, and woe to the rich and the happy. It's a complete reversal of social norms. Jesus challenges our way of thinking, our very values. And he continues this challenge in today's Gospel. If last week's challenge was about how we think, this week's challenge is about how we act. So today, I want to look at how we act, focusing particularly on three aspects: love in action, mercy and forgiveness, and lastly, extravagant generosity. Because you see, Jesus says, these are characteristics of your Father in heaven, and his challenge this week for us, is to emulate our Father in heaven and become children of the Most High. Let's have a closer look.

Well as I pondered all our readings for this week, I couldn't help but ask, What is it to be a Child of God? What is our distinctive? Our charism? What sets us apart? If we look at our Old Testament story today, we hear the extraordinary story of forgiveness between Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery out of jealous anger. The psalmist also touches on the Gospel themes: let go of anger and abandon wrath, trust in the Lord and do good. Scripture today seems to be reinforcing Jesus' charge to us, to be different. It's a bit uncomfortable, isn't it? We spend most of our lives trying to fit in, not be different! So what does Jesus say to his disciples and all who will listen to him?

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Well, this is an extraordinary instruction, though perhaps not unexpected given that it follows the blessings and woes! In its day it was radical, and it still sounds radical today. Jesus is asking us to return a blessing for a curse, and he goes on to say if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and then, if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. In themselves, such actions and attitudes don't make sense, even if we make allowances for the exaggeration that can mark Jesus' prophetic speech. So what is he doing here, for those of us who listen? I think he is trying to lead us to a fundamental attitude change which would probably be considered foolish by worldly standards.

And having stated his charge, to even love your enemies, he then seeks to convince by appealing to us through two different lenses. Firstly he says “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus asks us to take a good look at ourselves. Don't we want people to like us, even the ones we don't particularly like ourselves? Don't we want people to be kind to us, even the ones we don't particularly care about? Don't we want people to forgive us

when the need arises, as it inevitably does, even the ones who deserve the slight that we dished out? This golden rule, common across all world religions, challenges us in our inconsistency, in our hypocrisy and in our human frailty. But his second appeal, through the lens of God, contains the nub of his argument. He says:

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

If we are to be in relationship with God, to be children of God the Most High, we are to emulate God. For just as God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, so should we. And just as God forgives, so should we. To be children of God implies a close relationship. It's not a transactional thing or a business relationship. Jesus uses the family metaphor constantly when describing his and our relationship with God. A family relationship, in its ideal form, means love, support, forgiveness, generosity. And Jesus says that we should extend that relationship not just to those we love or who love us (that's easy), but to everyone, even including our enemies, just as God does.

So Jesus' charge to us as the community of Christ is to extend our love to those beyond our network, to the broad humanity that live on our doorstep. Remember for this sermon, Jesus is preaching not just to his closest, or even his broader group of disciples. He is surrounded by all those people who have come to see, to listen, to be healed, to be saved. He is reaching out to them, just as we should reach out to those in this community of Lara and Little River.

But how can we love our enemies, or do good for those who hate us or bless those who curse us? Jesus says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is

merciful.” And then “Forgive and you will be forgiven.” Forgiveness is a core part of our relationship with each other and also for our own personal wellbeing. Holding onto past grievances, hurts and even damage, is not healthy for us either individually or socially. And it’s very hard to do that externally facing love of the other, unless we have done the internal forgiveness work. Perhaps we ourselves, like Joseph in Old Testament times, need to forgive people in our past for actions both large and small, perhaps we need to forgive our own selves for things that we carry in shame, perhaps we need to forgive God, when our mind tells us that God is to blame. It’s hard to love others, isn’t it, without doing the piece of forgiveness work? So with this in mind, over Lent we will embark on a meditative study series on forgiveness, written by a local team including Bishop Huggins, who has agreed to come and facilitate the 2<sup>nd</sup> session with us. I do hope that you will join us on Saturdays at 4pm, and if we have more than ten people, we’ll create a second group.

Jesus rounds out this part of his sermon with:

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

And this leads me into a reflection on the extravagant nature of God’s love. God who created our world, who loves our world and each of us in it, who is even kind to the ungrateful and wicked. God asks us to be generous too. Jesus says: if anyone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. And give to everyone who begs from you. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your

lap. Our generosity should match God's generosity and with forgiveness and generosity, our relationship with God and others will grow.

This week coming will conclude our Epiphany journey, with next Sunday celebrating the Transfiguration, a fitting conclusion to this season. It's a journey in which we have been challenged to see how God breaks into our lives, how God makes a difference. I think that this sermon on the plain, is Jesus saying that we are different, we look at the world differently and we are challenged to behave differently. Let's keep this in mind as we come together next Saturday to discern where God wants us to be in the future, here in Lara and Little River, and how we are going to get there.

Let us pray.

Loving, generous and forgiving God, we give you thanks that you are a God who comes into our lives, willing us to change and be changed. Guide and help us to understand how to be your people in this place.

This week we also pray for the families and friends of Ivan Fairchild as they remember, as they grieve, as they smile and cry. Give them strength and courage to move through the mourning and come out the other side with peace and hope in their hearts. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.