

Reading: Matthew 5:38-48

*Loving God*

*Open the Scriptures to us in a new and exciting way.*

*In Jesus name we ask it. Amen.*

God wants you to have a fulfilling, happy and abundant life. I say that because the attitude we bring to our reading today is important.

Jesus says, "You have heard that it is said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, ...but I say to you, love your enemies and do good to those that hate you..."

I don't know about you, but I find it very hard to love those who do harm. Following the terrible flooding in the North Island, one man returned to his flood damaged car and found that it had been looted. All his belongings of any value had been taken from it. His first instinct and mine would not be to love those people.

To be sure, the old law of Moses was a big improvement in what went on before. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth limits the revenge, the want to get even. The problem is, as Martin Luther King pointed out, that if we practice an eye for an eye, the whole world ends up blind. Applied at a national level, it could have been the end of us all. At the height of the cold war the superpowers had a doctrine of what they called Mutually Assured Destruction, or M.A.D. Mad! It was the eye for an eye gone ballistic. If the Soviet Union launched a missile, then America would respond in kind. If the Americans did this, then the Soviets would send another and so on until the whole world was destroyed by nuclear war. How any of us got any sleep, I don't know! One theologian I read said that having a nuclear deterrent is like tying your newborn baby to the front of your car to avoid having an accident.

Jesus turns the world upside down with his radical teaching. No longer are we to take revenge. Instead, we are to seek the best for our enemies, in effect, to love them. But don't we feel better when we get even, a little bit of revenge for closure?

Debbie Morris was just 16 when she was raped and brutalized, held for 12 hours, and left for dead. Her boyfriend was killed in front of her. Her attacker was caught and put on death row ie sentenced to be put to death. For years this felt like justice. Debbie waited with great expectation for the moment her rapist was to be put to death. Eventually he was, but strangely she felt no better. In fact, she began to feel worse, she suffered from depression, and nothing seemed to help. About five years later she was praying, and she realized that for her to move on, she needed to forgive the man. He had completely ruined her life, but if she played the victim, as long as she was unforgiving, he still had power over her. In a moment of blinding realization, she knew he could have been put to death 500 times and it

would never help her. What she needed was forgiveness. It sure was hard, but she embarked on a journey of forgiveness. Her family urged her otherwise. But the more she forgave, the more she set herself free. Forgiveness was the key she discovered to liberating her own life. Today she has completely forgiven the man and tours the US teaching others about the power of Christian forgiveness. If you asked Debbie "Was it an easy journey?" the answer would be, "No!" But if you asked, "Was it a necessary one?" she would say, "Yes."

You see God wants us to have fulfilling happy lives, that's why Jesus taught forgiveness. A book on my bookshelf by Desmond Tutu, the South African archbishop and anti-apartheid campaigner, says it all. The book is entitled, "No Future Without Forgiveness." Whether it's an individual or a nation, this is the truth. Forgiveness sets us free.

Walking the extra mile, turning the other cheek, loving our enemies. These are all impossible without God's grace, but with grace all things are possible - even the setting free of a soul from bitterness.

This sort of extraordinary grace is only possible as we build up grace in our hearts. It's a bit like physically training, we start off slowly and only after much training we can take on the Coast to Coast. We need grace training too. Start with practicing on your spouse or your kids, or that person at work that really gets up your nose. Practice at church. Slowly, as we build up, we are becoming more and more Christlike ourselves. Don't give up, pray for grace. In our ordinary everyday life, we experience it so often from others.

I was at the dentist, not usually a very grace-filled occasion! The double pain - the drill and then the bill! In the waiting room was a former student of mine from the Polytech. She yelled out to me, "Nick, so great to see you, you were a brilliant tutor," she said it in front of everyone else. I felt 10 feet tall, what a grace-full thing to say.

When humans find enough grace to want the best for even our enemies, we have humanity at its most noble.

This prayer was found on a concentration camp wall:

*Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will.*

*Do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought thanks to this suffering -*

*Our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this.*

*And when they come to judgment let all the fruits that they bore be their forgiveness.*

This forgiveness, this wanting the best for others, isn't easy teaching but it is lifegiving teaching. For, in the end, our unforgiveness, our hatred of others serves to put us in a prison of our own making, a prison of bitterness. We can set ourselves free with God's grace. This is the good news of today's reading.