

Dear Friends,

Matthew 5: 43-48

Within the space of five verses Jesus asks you to do two things which seem impossible. First, he says "Love your enemy", then "Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect". My suggestion is that you are being asked to learn what God's ways are and to imitate them, to be aware of how God treats people and to treat them in the same way. The passage gives us a couple of practical examples of that.

For example, Jesus says don't save your greetings only for your sisters and brothers. The implication is that you are to be open to greeting everyone. So, the general instructions, "Be perfect" and "Love your enemy", are worked out in your choice of those to whom you choose to say "Hello". That seems so down to earth that it's rather mundane. Surely Jesus wants more than that from you?

It may help to get a picture of what people felt it meant to give a greeting. Jesus is not talking about being off hand and giving someone a quick wave without even making eye contact. That's not what Jesus has in mind at all. In the time of Jesus, to greet someone was to give them attention and help them to know that they were seen; it was to acknowledge that there was a bond between the one greeting and the one being greeted; and it expressed a desire for the other's welfare.

This is the way that God greets you. You can hear it when God says, "I have called you by your name. You are mine. You are precious and honoured in my sight and I love you".

When God calls you by your name God is giving you attention. When God says "You are mine" God is accepting you as you are and assuring you that you belong together. When God says "I love you" you are being assured that God works for your well-being and strives to give you peace and good things. You are called to imitate God by treating others as God treats you.

And the same generous love God gives to you is given to all. God's love is universal. It is for the whole creation. In our passage, Jesus illustrates the wide embracing love of God in these words, "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous". There are people who seek to know and be open to God and people who don't; There are those who tend to live pretty well making life a lot better for others and there are those who deliberately choose to act in ways which cause great harm. This passage says that God loves them all with the same love.

And that may help us to understand what it actually means to be "Perfect". To be perfect can mean to be finished, to require no further work. We might describe someone as being the finished article. Guess what, you are not going to achieve that in this life, but committing yourself to grow and mature towards it is no bad thing. Only please don't be a perfectionist, it will be hard work for you and exhausting for the rest of us.

But "Perfect" can also mean complete, whole, undivided. I wonder if Jesus, when he asks for perfection, is talking less to each individual and more to the group of people who make up the community of the Church. He is calling the Church to be complete by putting into practice the commitment to make all welcome. God gives the same love to all. We imitate God by being open to all.

We are called to share God's way, by giving attention to others, accepting them as they are and working for their good. And we are to offer this to all so that God's family may be complete, whole and undivided.

God bless you,

Tony