

St Brandon's Brancepeth
Sermon for 3rd September 2017
Romans 12. 9-21; Matt. 16. 21-28 - revenge

INTRO:

I want to ask you to do something that may be painful – sorry.

I'm going to ask you to think if there's anybody you might be tempted to seek revenge against. And that's why it may be painful, because they will have hurt you, and that's why you might want to see them hurt or brought down a peg or two, or five, in return.

That may be all too easy a question: there is someone, and something they did – or you believe they did – and you are there immediately. Or this may not seem to strike a chord at all.

1. FORGIVENESS, JUSTICE AND VENGEANCE

But I'm thinking about this because we read in Romans, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves."

Pretty direct, that. Not much wriggle-room here, nor space for complicated interpretation. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves."

Now, let me make it clear that in raising this I'm not telling anyone here that you must forgive someone for what they have done to you; I can't do that. And forgiveness is a tricky manoeuvre: it can be hard to do if the person you need to forgive isn't sorry. So I'm not trying to foolishly or unfairly tell anyone to forgive. Nor does Paul here in Romans 12.

But struggling to forgive is one thing and wanting revenge is another.

Similarly, I'm not suggesting that justice does not matter: the pain we feel at something done to us may lead us to want it recognised that this was wrong: justice put things right by declaring publicly a wrong was a wrong, and was not OK.

But seeking justice is one thing and seeking revenge is another.

2. REVENGE AND US

As I read these disconcertingly direct words I tried to think how many sermons I've heard about revenge.

Well, Geoff preached a while ago about the cross of Christ enabling us to break the cycle of revenge in the world. But apart from that, I don't think I've ever heard one on this. And yet we live in a world where revenge has a huge impact.

Behind all the religious rhetoric of some extremists, revenge also looms large: Sunni and Shia Muslims have such a bitter history between them that fuels much of the conflict in the Middle East.

Similarly, a hunger for revenge against western foreign policy and bombing also sucks young Muslims into Isis and other groups: vengeance is part of what is being enacted in the terrorist acts we are seeing all over the world.

And Revenge can pull our strings in less obviously dramatic ways too:

Bitterness at work about what someone did to us, and how it hampered our career, success or popularity – that is really common. And people sometimes plot hard to bring down the colleague who harmed them.

A desire for others to come to harm happens in churches too: there may not be an active intent to inflict harm, but sometimes people manage to harbor grievances against fellow-worshippers for decades, going back to who did or didn't get their way in a disagreement years ago. There are churches in neighbouring villages in some parts of England who won't work together because they took different sides in the Civil War – in the 1640s! And a grievance harboured is just revenge in suspense: I may not actively plot, but I hope so-and-so will come to grief.

And this is tragic, because if we share communion with people we actually do not wish well, then we must be missing the point: we are remembering Jesus dying to put an end to all hatred and bring us together. We can't eat and drink at the eucharist with our fingers crossed behind our backs; sharing the peace before communion is not a trite way of saying hello designed to annoy introverts – it points to what communion has to do among us, if we are getting it at all.

And then we could talk about revenge within families, where again cycles of grievance about things said, done, wounds given and received, can really shape us – or rather, mis-shape us.

And of course real pain can make us grieve, and grief can turn to grievance, and a desire for revenge easily follows. And, yes, this can be linked to a sense of injustice, and the need for justice. But Vengeance only poses as Justice's bride: they are not really a happy couple.

Try to imagine a novel where the hero is motivated by a desire for vengeance, and they finally get their own back, settle the score, and from that day they sleep easily, are at peace, made whole. No – it doesn't really work; or at least it doesn't feel good. The same story,

where justice is done, or the hero is enabled to forgive yes, that we can imagine. But Revenge can't call us to peace; Revenge is like the mythical Sirens who used to sing to sailors, luring them to their doom on the rocks.

Revenge sounds so sweet, but solves nothing, heals no one.

3. ROMANS AND REVENGE

But still, what right has Paul got to tell us not to seek vengeance? Typical moral sort of thing for a saint to say.

Yes – except this was a man who had plenty of reasons to justify feelings of vengeance himself: Paul was often bad-mouthed and betrayed by friends and colleagues in the churches, causing him bitter pain. With friends like that, who needs enemies? But he had plenty of those too: he was beaten up countless times and formally flogged five times with the Roman 39 lashes, and imprisoned repeatedly. All for sharing the good news. He has plenty to feel sore about.

But he writes to the Roman Christians – probably a very small church, meeting in a house at the heart of the hostile empire, very vulnerable themselves to persecution – he writes to these people who will have their own reasons to feel aggrieved, and says, “Don't repay evil with evil. As much as you can make it happen, live at peace with people around you. Never avenge yourselves.”

He writes this because he knows that the heart of the gospel is forgiveness. Forgiveness: from God, through Christ, for all – to turn the world from hatred to friendship.

I was trying to think of someone who embodied what Paul teaches here in Romans 12, and the person who comes to a mind is a local

man called Dusty Miller. He was a Methodist, from Newcastle, but he was one of the prisoners of war who suffered appallingly at the hands of their Japanese captors in the infamous River Kwai camps. We know about him because of the book written by Ernest Gordon, who was nursed back from the brink of death by Miller, and who survived the war. What struck Gordon was that Dusty Miller refused to hate; and would not respond to the abuse he received with anger. His Christian example proved inspiring to desperate men, many of who rediscovered their own faith – life-giving, hope-giving faith, in the most desperate of situations.

How do we feel when Paul quotes the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord”?

Is he saying it’s not OK for us to do revenge, but God can?

I think not: for Paul, Christ is God, and in Christ and through Christ’s death and resurrection all divisions were overcome. So the only safe hands in which to leave matters of revenge are God’s, where somehow pain can be forgiven without justice being ignored. That is the miracle of salvation: evil is not condoned, but it does not determine our future either, when left at the cross.

Only God is qualified to handle the matters that otherwise lead us to seek revenge.

4. OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD

All this seems to me particularly important in our time.

We live in a world where evil threatens to overcome good, in many ways. How will we absorb the tidal waves of pain caused by terrorist

attacks, with every injury and death creating its own little constellation of suffering?

How will we respond to the backlash, with neo-Nazis saying the answer is superiority, separation, suspicion and hatred of anyone who is other?

And how will we simply live well at home, at work, in our village, where there are plenty of things we can be upset about – and which we could seek to settle scores over, or simply wish others ill over?

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

It is significant that Abp Justin has three priorities for his time as our church’s leader: the deepening of prayer, sharing the gospel through witness and evangelism, and reconciliation.

Justin says:

“Reconciliation doesn’t mean we all agree. It means we find ways of disagreeing – perhaps very passionately – but loving each other deeply at the same time, and being deeply committed to each other. That’s the challenge for the church if we are actually going to speak to our society, which is increasingly divided in many different ways.”

Today is the 78th anniversary of Britain declaring war on Germany. Yesterday we celebrated a wedding here, between a young German woman and a young British man. The gospel of Jesus Christ encourages us to believe in and work for such transformations, always.

It is about receiving the peace of Christ, which we celebrate in the eucharist, and living it, in our homes, communities, work-places, and

relationships with others. This challenges me about how I relate to those ... I'm related to and to those very different to me.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

CONCLUSION:

So if you found it hard to relate to the theme of this sermon – there's just no one you wish ill upon, and you have no grievances – thank God, and pray for the rest of us.

If it was all too easy, ask God to help you lay down the pain and any desire for revenge, and give you something better in its place. The gospel mystery is: if we want to save our lives by clinging to our grievances, we lose life; if we will loose or hold on them, and lose those things, we will be given life.

In the name of the God who is love,
the God who is light, and in whom there is no darkness at all,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rick Simpson