

Talk-4

Matthew 5:21-26

Tuning in to Jesus' epic Sermon on the Mount, we've been exploring *Kingdom, not Empire*.

1. *Resistance* - Jesus calls us to stand up to oppressors, using radical, non-violence
2. *Reconciliation* - Jesus calls us to radical love, not just those 'like us' - even to love our enemies
3. *Repentance* - Jesus tells us to repent, change our thinking/ attitude, bringing Heaven on Earth.
4. And, now, *Reparations* - when saying sorry is not enough.

Jesus deals first with violence.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'"

You don't need to be a Christian - a Christ-follower - to get this. It's true of all societies/ communities/ religions. We all think murder - the deliberate taking of an innocent human life - is wrong:

- they deserve *punishment*
- those left grieving deserve *justice*
- and we all deserve *protection*.

But Jesus goes further. Violence doesn't start when the 'red mist' descends in that split-second decision to knife someone - it starts *way* before. It begins when unspoken resentment starts to smoulder; when increasing anger fans that into flames; and when, if left unchallenged, that fire begins to rage, to burn out of control. Then, Jesus says, "If you even *start* down this road, "You'll be in danger of the '*fire of hell*'.

Yet, when Jesus speaks of, what's often *translated* as, 'hell', he wasn't heaping judgement, condemnation on people. He wasn't threatening some future cosmic, eternal punishment. You'd better do "X" because, if you don't, when you die, you'll go to.. *hell*. No, Jesus was talking about a *real place*, known as Gehenna - Jerusalem's rubbish dump. It was a hellish place where all the city's rotting rubbish - and corpses were dumped; dumped there because, unlike the privileged, they weren't thought worthy enough to have a 'proper' funeral. And where previous generations had sacrificed *children* to Molech. What contortions had they

gone through to convince themselves it was ever OK to murder innocent children for their own gratification?

You dump *bodies* on a refuse tip, like they're trash, when you cease to see them as *people* - beautifully, wonderfully made in God's image. You sacrifice children - kill them - when you see them as nothing more than religious artefacts, fuel for the Temple fire - *not* people 'like us'.

Jesus was saying, if you treat people like they are somehow less worthy, less human, less beautifully made in God's image, then you too could find yourself dumped on Gehenna. Not only are you killing, denying, *their* humanity / their life, you're also killing / denying something of *your* own humanity too. When you start to see people as "not us", a problem to be overcome, an enemy to be defeated, or when you start to view them as someone inferior to you, then you're on the road to Gehenna - that hellish place. Don't go there. Wise up before it's too late. Repent.

So many of our problems today arise because we don't see / value the humanity in each other. How, for example, were the Nazis able to do what they did in the 1930s and 40s? How were they allowed to kill - how were they *helped* to kill - six million Jewish people, plus a further five million "others" - those "not like us": 'Gypsies' / travellers, those with disabilities, those born gay, or who thought differently... The Holocaust became possible, even inevitable, with the dehumanising of people - the hell of Gehenna that treated "others" as less-than-human.

We need to be hugely wary of those who use de-humanising language today, for example when speaking of refugees, LGBT communities, people of colour...

Likewise, today, we look back into our history and struggle to understand how the British Empire, and other Colonial nations, permitted - even encouraged, and certainly profited from - the transatlantic slave trade. Again, it was the dehumanising of people - slippery slope to Gehenna

Twelve *million* were taken as slaves. You could only do this if you convinced yourself they were less-than-human, a commodity, a resource. 15-20% died on route. Two plus million people. Many didn't just die; they were thrown overboard because they had become too weak / too sick. If they were sold in that condition, they would fetch a lower price. But the new insurance industry meant, if a slave died, the slave trader could instead claim on insurance. So, mid Atlantic, they would literally throw the sickest slaves overboard to drown at sea. That sounds to us like murder. But they'd convinced themselves they were transporting cargo, not people "like us".

The crime started way before that final moment. It began when whole new industries were created to maximise the profit. It began when new, more efficient cargo ships were designed and built to transport the maximum number of not-quite-human cargo. It began when we saw slave labour as the way to get cheap goods. It began when some within the Church taught that people of colour were a *different* race, and even that they were somehow less-than-human.

Whatever form the killing, the dehumanising takes, it ALL has the same root. Seeing “others” as somehow less than “us”. That’s why, today, again, we must be ready to always call-out de-humanising language wherever / whenever we hear it.

Jesus was so right to alert us to what happens when we see people as “other” and “less-than-us”

I think it’s time for a bit of cooking.

During lockdown, like a lot of people, I’ve cooked more. Today, I’m cooking spaghetti bolognaise. You know as well as I, my bolognaise is going to need onion. If I miss it out, my bolognaise will lack flavour, it’ll be bland - tasteless. Onion is not the *only* ingredient. Here, I’ve got tomatoes, garlic... It would be an odd bolognaise that *just* had onion, nothing else. But it definitely needs onion in the mix.

So, here’s my onion. If I simply dump the onion whole into the pan, but do not really engage with it, you’d rightly call me out. What are you doing? That’s not how you use onion. For the onion to properly do it’s thing, releasing it’s flavour throughout the whole dish, I need to peel back it’s layers.

Starting first with the very obvious outer layer. But to get the full effect, the full benefit, I need to peel back more layers.

Some stop short simply because it makes *them* feel uncomfortable. It might make them cry. To avoid the possibility of tears, they avoid onion as much as possible. If they’d only press through, even through their tears, they’d get what onion is all about.

Of course, I’m not here as your Chef. This isn’t the Cooking Channel. I’m speaking as your Church Minister. And this isn’t just about how to make a good bolognaise.

The onion is an illustration - an illustration of racial justice. Think of racial justice as like an onion. It’s multi-layered. The more you engage with racial justice, the more layers you realise it has. Just when I think I’ve come to some understanding about racial justice, I realise there are more

layers I have yet to engage with. And yes, if I truly engage with racial justice, if I really understand the enormity of injustice that others have experienced, then it should break me. It should break all of us, in the way it breaks God's heart.

Peeling back the layers on racial justice, when it truly sinks in just how vile – evil – the slave trade was, how Colonial powers like Britain used oppression to plunder the wealth from African and Asian nations to boost our own wealth and privilege – and that this is one of the reasons why many of those nations remain so far behind in economic wealth when compared to Britain today –, then it's not surprising we start to ask if we should make reparations – make amends for our past wrongs.

Jesus said,

“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

If you know you've hurt some, don't try to carry on as if nothing happened. Don't think it's OK to keep rocking up for worship, singing your songs of praise, when all the time you know you've cause people real pain. *You* know. *They* know. God knows. As important as worship is (and it is!), if that's you, drop everything, and go and seek reconciliation. Repent. Say sorry. And get that broken relationship fixed. Remember, they are your *brothers and sisters* – family. Treat them that way.

We can apply this on a global, historical basis too.

If we, as Britain, know we've caused real pain to others – now or in the past – we too should seek reconciliation. Owning our own guilt and responsibility – our sin. Seeking forgiveness, reconciliation. Trying to carry on, like Colonial slave trading isn't an issue today, is not an option. So, it's quite right that we Repent. Say sorry.

But, as ever, radical Jesus doesn't leave it there. He then says,

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

If you know you've done wrong, and it's caused others real hardship, then compensate them. Don't think you can end it just by saying sorry.

Imagine I stole something from you. If I eventually said sorry but still refused to return what I'd stolen, what would you think of my apology? Jesus says, settle matters – and quickly. Don't drag your heels. Just because I stole your stuff awhile back, you would still expect me to hand it back. No-one would say, well, because you stole it a while ago, you can keep it. Finders keepers! We know, on a personal level, it doesn't work like that. Don't make the one you've hurt, caused pain to, re-live their pain by having to pursue you through the courts. Remember, *you're* the one in the wrong. So settle. Pay up.

We totally get this when we are the ones wronged. Yes, an apology helps. But we also expect our stuff back. So, again, what might at first sound radical, is just Jesus speaking common sense. Life goes better when we live His way.

Jesus is speaking to all of us. Maybe specifically to you today. Is there a relationship you need to put right? Is there a hurt you need to apologise for? Is there something you need to make amends for?: To return?; To pay back?; To replace? If you've hurt someone, apologise. Sometimes saying sorry is not enough. We need to put things right.

When we do this, we affirm their humanity and rediscover more of our own humanity too.

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