

In our confirmation rite the candidates are asked this question: ***'Since you are God's children through holy baptism, do you intend to listen to the preaching of God's word, and to receive the supper of our Lord?'***

So: when people come forward for confirmation in the faith

We together understand that they are already God's children,

And that they were adopted into the household of faith

Through baptism into Christ Jesus.

As baptised people, as members of the household of faith,

As disciples of the Lord Jesus,

They are then asked if they intend to *listen* to God's word

And to *receive* the supper of the Lord.

Built into this question is the understanding that the life of faith

Is lived receptively:

That through listening to God's word, and receiving the Lord's Supper,

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to lead holy lives.

We are freed share in the mindset of Christ:

We, and those around us, learn that we are God's children

As we show love for each other.

I'm starting this way because in today's Gospel reading

Jesus is addressing primarily his disciples:

He's giving his teaching to people he has *already* called.

In fact this whole section of teaching begins with these words:

**Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said: Blessed are you...**

He gives his teaching to those *who are already with him*.

So it's good to be clear that discipleship starts with the call of Christ

Not with our ability to anything for God,

And as disciples who have been called by Jesus,

Called into discipleship through holy baptism,

We grow together as we listen to Jesus' word.

Jesus' Spirit-filled word that has power

To transform us from the inside out.

So just as Jesus first disciples were called,

And then they listened to Jesus' word.

So let's listen as God's called people to Jesus' teaching today,

And let's let his word do its work in our lives as individuals,

And on us together as members of the Bethlehem congregation.

Here's how today's reading begins: **'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.'**

Jesus here is giving us his word on what to do

When we unjustly suffer verbal abuse:

When we unjustly suffer persecution for confessing Christ,

And also when we suffer verbal abuse in the everyday friction of life.

To get into this teaching I'll talk about something

From my own experience.

Most of you here know that most of the time I wear a clerical shirt.  
I didn't so much early in my ministry,  
But by the time I got to my previous parish I'd come to the conclusion  
That it pays to advertise: most people in our society know  
That if you wear a black shirt with a white collar  
Then you're some sort of leader in the church.  
So, here in Adelaide I'm often walking around the city  
Clearly identifiable as a leader in the church.  
Most of the time people don't pay any special attention to me,  
But sometimes I get reactions, both positive and negative.

On the positive side I have people smile,  
And it's not uncommon to share words of blessing in God's name.  
On the negative side I've had people scowl, yell, and swear at me,  
And make threatening gestures to me.  
Not often, but it does happen.

Now I understand that for many people the clerical outfit  
Symbolises wicked acts done in Christ's name,  
And so it's not surprising that they have a go at me.  
I also understand that many people are simply very angry at God  
And are looking for some way to take their anger out.

Nevertheless at an emotional level  
I have different and contradictory reactions.  
On the one hand I want to give rude people a thump,  
To make them pay of yelling at me or threatening me.  
On the other hand I want to play the coward  
And slink off and not be seen.  
But Jesus' teaching on what to do is neither violent nor cowardly,  
Rather, it's practical and powerful:  
Again, this is what Jesus says, **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**  
When we are the victims of unjust abuse  
Jesus encourages us to be active: to love, to do good, to bless,  
And to pray – to pray for the people who make us angry or fearful.  
This is a creative and godly way of dealing with abuse.  
When we do this we follow the example of Jesus himself,  
Who prayed from the cross, **'Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing'**.  
We also follow the example of the saints, including St Stephen,  
Who, when he was being stoned to death,  
Prayed like his master, **'Lord, do not hold this sin against them'**.  
When we do good, when we bless, when we pray,  
That is God at work in us,  
Freeing us from the apparent power abuse:  
We experience that our abusers do not have real power over us,  
That *they cannot define who we are*.  
And when we love and do good and bless and pray,  
We show who we really are: children of the Most High.

This dynamic is at work in what Jesus goes on to say,  
Again in response to different abusive behaviour: **If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.**

At first Jesus was talking about what we could call verbal abuse,  
But now he deals with physical abuse and abuse of our property.  
He's giving us teaching on what to do when people abuse their power  
Over us by abusing our bodies or property.

Again, Jesus' teaching on what to do is practical and powerful,  
And it seems to me to have at its heart  
The goal of bringing the abuser to their senses.

So, when Jesus says, **from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt**  
It seems to have this implication:

'So, you want to use your power over me to deprive me of my coat?  
Then take my shirt as well, you can be responsible for my nakedness...  
Is this what you *really* want to do? Is *this* who you are?'

It's very natural for us to hear this teaching and to think,  
I just can't do it, it's too much.

But let's just listen to Jesus' word,  
Because his word has power that we don't have,  
And his word frees us to live as true disciples.

Jesus then goes on to give what we know as the Golden Rule:

**Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

This teaching is, among other things,  
An invitation to us from our Lord to use our imaginations,  
And to open our eyes and ears to other people.  
What do I mean?

Well, our Lord wants us to think about what it's like  
To walk *in other people's shoes*,  
And to think about how we'd like to be treated *if we were them*.  
To take an absurd counter example: if I liked both kinds of music,  
Country and western, I wouldn't keep the Golden Rule  
By playing it loudly from speakers in my house  
On the assumption that my neighbours must love it as well.  
No: we need to use our imaginations:  
What's it like to be someone else?  
What's it like to be a man or a woman? Young or old?  
To be living in a society where we do or don't speak the language well?  
What's it like to have different ability in seeing or hearing or moving?  
What's it like to have or not have friends, or a job, or family?  
As we think about these questions we learn how to treat others  
As we would like to be treated *if we were them*.

Of course, our imaginations can fail us,  
And so Jesus' teaching is an invitation to us  
To open our eyes see others as they are,

And to open our ears and listen to what they have to say.  
It's in this way especially that we grow in our ability to treat others  
As we'd like to be treated,  
And to have the law of love fulfilled in our lives by God.

Today we don't have time to go into all of Jesus' teaching  
In this part of Luke's Gospel,  
But I just want to draw your attention to one more part,  
Where Jesus 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.**

Sometimes as modern western people we think  
That if an action is to be truly good  
Then we must be disinterested actors:  
That we must do the right thing simply because it is the right thing,  
And not because we expect any reward.  
But this does not seem to me  
To be the teaching of Jesus or the Apostles.  
It is very true that Jesus warns us against looking for a lasting reward  
From the *human* community, or from *worldly* investing,  
But he does encourage us, even in this part of Scripture,  
To expect reward *from God*.  
When we show the same mercy that God shows us,  
We can be sure that God will *reward us*.  
More than this, we can trust that God is not only just,  
But that he is *good*, that he is *generous*.  
In Christ Jesus, after all, we know what God is like:  
That he has mercy on his enemies,  
That he helps those in need,  
That he is generous to us, even when we are ungrateful.

In fact Jesus' teaching, more than telling us what to do,  
Reveals to us who he is, who God is:  
In his life on love and mercy,  
In his path to the cross and to the resurrection,  
Jesus showed us that God is for us, not against us,  
That he forgives our sins,  
Helps us in our weakness,  
And frees us to treat others as we'd like to be treated ourselves.

So, as disciples of Christ,  
Let's continue to listen to his word, and receive his supper,  
Knowing that the Spirit-filled word of Jesus  
Gives us life with the Father, and with each other.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.