

## **NONVIOLENCE, THE WAY OF JESUS, THE ONLY WAY**

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We live in a world where pay-back, tit for tat, retaliation, seem an automatic response – from the playground to the Halls of Parliament. Contrast the teaching of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. Living his teaching, though, is not easy. For one thing, what Jesus seems to say and what he means are not exactly the same.

In response to hatred, hostility, aggression and attack, Jesus seems to be saying not to resist, not to take revenge, and to go even further than people force us to go. In fact, he appears to be asking us to be stupid and passive doormats that others can walk all over.

While it is true that Jesus does teach nonviolence, he does not require us to be dumb and silent doormats. What he really means can be seen by looking at his own life. He said: *'If anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him your left one too.'* But when he himself was struck on the face on the way to Calvary, he did not literally turn the other cheek but said to his attacker: *'If what I said was wrong, tell me. If I was right, why did you hit me?'* (Jn 18:23). So Jesus spoke up for himself. He asked his attacker to justify his behaviour. Indirectly he was challenging his aggressor to change his ways.

For Jesus, tensions between people are to be resolved through open and honest dialogue so that what may start as a misunderstanding or disagreement doesn't develop into insults, grudges, hatred, rage, hitting or bashing. If, in fact, we let ourselves become hateful we burn up more energy than with any other emotion. Hate can become so demanding and consuming that it takes people over and leaves them real train wrecks, bitter and twisted. We need to save our strength for better things, like being forgiving, helpful, patient, kind and compassionate. Like Nelson Mandela!

Mandela spent over twenty-seven years in South African prisons. When he was finally released, he had every reason to feel bitter, and to come

out bristling for revenge on those who had unjustly deprived him of his freedom. Instead he came out smiling, and seeking reconciliation with the leaders of the regime that had put him in prison. He thus became the foundation stone of a new South Africa. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Mandela tells us:

*I knew that people expected me to harbour anger against whites. But I had none. In prison, my anger towards whites decreased, but my hatred for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another. I saw my mission as one of preaching reconciliation, of healing the old wounds and building a new South Africa.*

Jesus dares to put the challenge to each one of us: *'love your enemies'*. He does not just mean the enemy in war. He is talking about someone close – someone in my family, my community, my work-place, my neighbourhood, who is making life difficult for me. Who are the people we try to avoid, the ones we don't want to talk to, the ones who have made us frightened or angry, the ones we find it hard to forgive, and the ones we feel like hating and hitting for what they have done to us?

But hate poisons the heart and destroys relationships. It does nothing to build a better world. When Jesus says *'love your enemies'* it is not only for their sake but for ours as well. It stops us stooping to the same base level and preserves our dignity and self-respect.

But returning love for hatred is one of the most difficult things we can do. Only God can help us love like God loves. God is the Father of all, and loves all human beings without any exceptions whatsoever. He lets his sun shine on bad and good people alike, and lets his rain fall on both those who do good and those who do evil. It's a matter, then, of *'like parent, like child'*, and a matter of loving with the great and generous heart of Jesus, who returned good for evil. Can there be any better example and any higher motivation than that?

**This is the way to become whole and complete persons, persons of maturity and integrity. Isn't that what Jesus means when he says: *'You must be perfect – just as your Father in heaven is perfect'*?**

**When Abraham Lincoln was running for president of the United States there was a man called Stanton, who never lost an opportunity to vilify him. Yet when Lincoln won the election, he gave him a cabinet post. Why was that? Because he considered him the best man for the job! He was proved right. For the trust he placed in Stanton, the man gave him loyal service. Asked why he didn't destroy his enemies, Lincoln replied: *'Don't I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?'***