

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 23rd February '25, Epiphany 7

Readings: **Genesis 45:3-11, 15**

Psalms 37:1-11, 40-41

1Corinthians 15:35-50

Luke 6:27-38

Izzeldin Abuelaish is a Palestinian medical doctor, and specialist, who was born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp of the Gaza Strip. He received a scholarship to study medicine in Cairo, before further study at the University of London. He worked in the Soroka Hospital in Israel, before further studies in Italy, Belgium, and the USA. Despite many offers to settle overseas, away from the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Dr Abuelaish chose to return and work as a senior researcher at the Sheba Hospital of Tel Aviv.

On January 16th 2009 an Israeli tank shelled the home of Dr Abuelaish, from close range, knowing that he and his family were inside. Tragically, his three daughters: Aya, Mayar, and Bessan were killed. Aya was the youngest, and wanted to be a journalist; Mayar was the top in her Grade at Maths, and wanted to be a doctor; and, Bessan had almost completed her business degree. In addition Dr Abuelaish's niece was killed. Her name was Noor.

After Dr Abuelaish had buried his daughters and his niece, he migrated to Canada with his remaining children, to work as a doctor. Twelve months later he wrote a book about his experience which is titled, 'I Shall Not Hate'. I would like to share two thought-provoking quotes from his book:

"We must all work toward freedom from disease, poverty, ignorance, oppression and hatred. In one horrifying year, my family and I faced tragedies that mountains cannot bear. But, as a Muslim with deep faith, I fully believe that what is from God is for good, and what is bad is man-made and can be prevented or changed..."

"...When it is your children who have become "Collateral Damage" in a seemingly endless conflict, when you have seen their bodies literally torn apart and beheaded, their young lives obliterated, how do you not hate? How do you avoid rage? I vowed not to hate and avoided rage because of my strong faith as a Muslim. The Quran taught me that we must endure suffering patiently and forgive those who create the man-made injustices that cause human suffering..."

In this weekend's Gospel reading Jesus is remembered saying to his disciples, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... (and)...Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Dr Abuelaish is a Muslim, and in the sacred writing of his faith he had heard a similar command to forgive and not hate. I hope that none of us will ever have to forgive what Dr

Abuelaish has chosen to forgive. But, in remembering his choice there is a reminder that forgiveness and love are possible, even after evil acts of violence.

For, the Old Testament rule of *'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'* sits very comfortably with human nature. You hit me, and I'll hit you back harder! You hurt a member of my family, and I will hurt you... and even break you! I think most studies of conflict in human history suggest that violence provokes further violence, and revenge, even when measured, provokes further revenge!

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is remembered saying, *"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you..."* and, in Luke's Gospel – the one we have heard today – Jesus is remembered saying, *"Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you..."*

So, who might you and I hate? And, if the language of hate is too strong: who do we not like? Who do we loathe? Who do we look down upon? And, conversely, who does not like us; loathes us, and looks down upon us?

I wonder if anyone has come to your mind as I've asked these questions? Over the years I have found the challenge to love and forgive someone who has done the wrong thing by me, or the wrong thing to a member of my family, to be a hard thing but it has usually been life-giving to try!

This doesn't mean that when we've been wronged, we keep putting ourselves in a situation where we repeatedly get abused or harmed by that person or those people. In such circumstances it would be a loving thing to call out the behaviour, if possible, or it may mean leaving.

It can be challenging to love people who have very different political beliefs to us, particularly when we are convinced we are right and they are utterly wrong! Some political rhetoric diminishes the value of others because of their ethnicity, their religious belief, or their gender and I don't like that diminishing rhetoric, and even hate it!

The challenge then could be to differentiate between the belief and the person. I may hate political or religious belief expressed by a person and I think there's room for that in the Gospel and even approval of that, but there's no Gospel approval to hate that person?

Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour!' and 'Love one another!' He did not say, 'Love your neighbour: if they think like you; if they look like you; and if they speak the same language!'

Later in Luke's Gospel a lawyer asks Jesus 'who is my neighbour?' and Jesus responds with the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. The impact of that story is hard for us to understand because we have little understanding about the polarised relationship that then

existed between Jewish and Samaritan communities. But, Jesus told the story to Jewish listeners and the hero of the story, the one who did the right thing, was a loathsome Samaritan. If he'd told the story to a group of Samaritans, it's reasonable to imagine that he would have told it in a different way such that the prejudice of that community could have been challenged.

If Jesus were retelling that parable to us today as a community, or as an individual, who would the hero be? It is likely that the hero would be someone we think of as our 'enemy'. A person from a group we look down upon, expect the worse from, and generally avoid. If we imagined THAT person doing the right thing by the injured person lying in the road could we better understand them be neighbours worthy of love?

I think so and would love to hear your thoughts.

For now, would you please join me as we close in prayer:

Holy God, we thank you your challenge to love others – even those who are different and difficult. Through your Spirit, give us courage when we are afraid, and wisdom when we are uncertain. We ask in the name of the one who calls us to follow and love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen