

# St Mary and St Peter's Church, Sunderland

Pontus Bramberg

Saturday March 4 AD 2023

The Lectionary continues our Lenten journey with the Gospel reading Matthew 5:43-end. This rather short passage consists entirely of the words of Our Lord (and is thus printed with red letters in many Bibles); specifically, Christ commands His disciples to love not only those who love them, as even the publicans do, but also their enemies. Love of one's neighbour is of course a central part of the Lord's teaching (in fact it is repeated on two other occasions later in St Matthew's Gospel). In this instance this love is extended also to our enemies; this is of course difficult for us to do. How can we love those hurt or want to hurt us? The answer is prayer. It is no coincidence that this teaching of love towards enemies is situated just a couple of verses prior to Jesus teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer, in which we pray that God may 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us'; this goes hand in hand with love for our enemies and is, as the words of the prayer tell us, intimately connected with the forgiveness we receive from God.

This teaching of love and forgiveness is an extension of the Lord's teaching about the perfection of God. He desires a spiritual maturity in His followers which reflects the perfection of God. We must always seek to imitate the perfect example of Christ, who, even when hanging on the Cross in literally excruciating (from the Latin '*ex crucio*', loosely translated as 'from crucifying') pain, asked His Father to 'forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). Whatever our enemies do to us, whether or not they know what they do, can never rise to the level of evil that is crucifying the perfectly innocent son of God and while we, unlike Christ, are not perfect, in innocence or in mercy, we are called to imitate Him to the greatest possible extent and therefore to forgive, love, and pray for our enemies as much as, if not in some cases more than, our friends. All of us have sinned and fallen utterly short of God's holy commandments but God loves all of mankind and forgives those who truly repent; we are called to imitate this in our whole lives.

Amen.