

A New Outlook

You have seen how the religious fervor of the Middle East can be stirred; how religious offence is easily taken; and when religious offence is taken how explosive and violent the situation can become. It's dangerous to challenge the faith tradition in such a setting.

To these Jews, Abraham is their father, he presented God's covenant to them; Moses was their great deliverer and the founder of the faith. To these Jews Abraham was the father of all who have faith; while it was through Moses that they received the Ten Commandments and through Moses they had the great celebration and sacrament of the Passover – a meal to remind them that God was their saviour. "We are the sons of Abraham" they would boldly declare. And the name of Moses was only ever uttered in thankful worshipful conversation.

Jesus enters the scene and says, "you have heard it said through Abraham and Moses... now I say unto you..." Can you imagine the scene, the outrage, the fury, the volume of the cries... cries of "blasphemy, blasphemy, you blaspheme..." Who is he to claim an authority like that of Abraham or Moses, *and claim a superior authority?*

'You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." And you'd think Jesus must have been very popular for proclaiming the love of God! Yet, not so! Proclaiming the unconditional love of God – unconditional *to all and sundry*; to all under any condition; to all under any circumstances is so very controversial. It was not what the priests and devout religious wanted to hear. What they wanted to hear was the message... they had heard... that God is a vengeful God, a judgmental God, and "what a fearful thing it was to fall into the hands of the living God".

In stark contrast to this Jesus of Nazareth reveals the wrath, anger and judgment of God to the woman caught in adultery. The wrath, anger and judgment of God in Jesus *looks like forgiveness*. The righteous religious found the message of Jesus impossible to accept and many will still not accept such a forgiving God today. They will not accept that "God is love" and for them God is *wrath, anger, condemnation* and judgment. You see the problem with "God is love" is where it leads you in life, in theology and in your religious practice. It has big consequences once accepted. It's altogether easier to hold to judgment and condemnation.

Spare a thought for these poor disciples of Jesus. The disciples were often just as shocked as any at what Jesus said and did. They often found themselves having to explain Jesus' behaviour to others: even though they couldn't explain it to themselves. What did they know about the authority he displayed or the new covenant he proclaimed?

"Your teacher associates with prostitutes and *the likes of them*. He goes into their houses and he eats with them. They are condemned by God for their wickedness yet your rabbi teaches love and forgiveness and says that *God is with the likes of them*."

Jesus teaches a love and forgiveness that the Jewish authorities were not ready to accept, they were not ready to hear it... never mind accept it! To them it was blasphemy. "You have heard it said and now I say unto you..." was completely other to what they had ever heard and all they believed. Jesus was challenging their vision of God. For them God was

just: "Vengeance is mine" says the Lord: that's what the Bible says! It's unbelievable and unimaginable that he says, "You have heard it said... but *now I say unto you...*"

We might say, "the image of God I have, I have received from Abraham, or from Wesley, from the Pope, from John Calvin..." or from some other great tradition and we refuse to allow our image of God to be reformed, even by Jesus of Nazareth.

God is love means that followers of Jesus don't cast the first stone because even though they have heard it said... ... When have you been inclined to judge and condemn and been ready to throw the first stone... only then to hear Jesus' say unto you?

Believing in a God who condemns his enemies forever gives us permission to do likewise. Following Jesus' way we are to commit to his teaching to love our enemies.

Following Jesus' way is where you don't just pray "forgive me my trespasses" but you now pray "forgive me my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me..." So you enter Jesus' way of praying for those who have hurt or offended you. In this way you actually practice Jesus' way of forgiveness: not in word but in action.

The afflicted were believed to be *cursed by God*; they were believed to be afflicted by God because of their sin, they were said to be *cursed by God*. But Jesus now says unto you that God is with them. No longer are you to cross the road to avoid them. Following Jesus' way you are to reach out to them.

You have heard it said that you must maintain the barriers between you and the Samaritans, between you and the Romans, between you and the Gentiles, between you and your enemy, but Jesus now says unto you "love your neighbour." But hating our enemy is so much easier! Building barriers comes easy to us – taking barriers down is something altogether different. Breaking down all barriers is Jesus way.

You have heard it said, "Kill the infidel among you", now I say unto you "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Put your sword away this is not my way.

Their much loved religious traditions have been passed down for centuries... "You have heard it said... but now I say unto you *this is the new covenant way...*"

Can you imagine the outcry... Jesus not only over-turned the tables he upset everything. Can you hear the followers of Abraham and Moses shouting: "blasphemer, blasphemer... you blaspheme!"

The Chief Priest leads the cry: "Crucify Him" for his "now I say unto you new way... new covenant". Crucify him!