

Reflection

Romans 12:9-21

There's an excellent little book called "Don't forgive too soon" that I have often recommended for people to read. This book looks at a Christian response to trauma from a perspective that is neither flight nor fight (and is not "freeze" either). All too often, because the "Christian" response is, as Paul says, not to repay evil with evil, we are socialised into becoming a door mat.

This "doormat" version of Christianity has had devastating consequences over the centuries, particularly for women who have been told to put up with abusive partners, rather than being empowered to respond and stop such abuse. It's also justified the many different colonised people being told to submit to their invaders. Being a "doormat" is not the only way of not repaying evil with evil.

As Paul gets to the end of the letter to the Romans, he turns from the theological to the ethical. This distinction is somewhat false, because it is the theological that shapes the ethical response, but having explored the theology, he now, from chapter 12, focuses on what all this theology means for how we live a Christian life.

Today's reading is about what this looks like, both inside and outside of the Christian community, with the emphasis being on the latter. We don't know of any specific persecution that happened before this letter was written, but we do know the Jewish people were expelled from Rome and possibly some of the Gentile Christians copped flack at this time because of their association with Jews.

The way to respond to these forces of violence against the community is not to engage in violence. This is sound advice, because if there is conflict, the small Christian community is likely to be blamed and punished. It is what typically happens to minority groups who are standing up against a mainstream culture. Instead Paul, like Jesus before him in the sermon on the mount, recommends active non-violence; holding a mirror up to those who would persecute this Christian community.

If the response is not obvious, Paul spells it out by quoting from Proverbs:

Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In a society where honour and shame are all important this "holding up of a mirror" to those who would do evil to this fledgling community, would have been utterly shameful for those who had been the perpetrators of violence. It is important to note:

When we show love toward someone, we are moving them toward God's goodness. To love someone is not simply to cater to the specific

likes and dislikes of that person. It is rather to act toward that person in ways that help them experience more of God's goodness.

Love means that we call out poor behaviour in ways that builds up the other and shows them a better way of being. It invites them to experience God's love and grace in new way. Simply allowing the other to continue in destructive behaviour is not a loving response.

This gives us an interesting challenge to consider. The five weeks from now until 4th October are designated by the World Council of Churches as the "Season of Creation. It starts on 1st September, when the Orthodox tradition starts their year with a day of prayer for creation and ends on 4th October, which in the Western tradition is the feast of St Francis of Assisi. It is a time to focus on praying for creation and listening to the call to act for it.

Over the last few months we have become even more aware of the need for action for creation – as Europe has suffered massive heat waves and wild-fires have ravaged many northern hemisphere countries. The scientists who have been warning us about climate change for the last 30 or more years, are now saying this is the result of having ignored those warning. There is limited time for action before its effects become irreversible.

What does it mean to live out our Christian faith in this world of upcoming climate catastrophe? There are some branches of Christianity that would say God will magically rescue us or that it will bring on the end times (and so see this as good). However, this is a theological misunderstanding, to put it politely. From Genesis where this world is affirmed as good, to Revelation that uses the imagery of the renewal of this earth, the care offered as part of Christian faith includes the planet on which we live.

The theme for this year's Season of Creation is "let justice and peace flow." This theme points out that without justice for all – including creation – we will not have peace on earth. It is an essential element for peace; Paul's examples of living a Christian life in today's readings also about applying justice to difficult situations. This challenges us to reflect on how we live out our faith in a world where humans are causing the change in climate.

This is a world where our young people are experiencing anxiety and depression as they look towards their likely future and the seemingly uncaring attitude of those with the power to change that future. How can we give the young people of today hope in tomorrow? How can we, as individuals or as a community, stand up to those who would do more of the same and continue destroying the earth and humanity's future. What does it mean to respond with active non-violence, to let justice and peace flow, in response to climate change today?