

Expecting the impossible?

As I write the clashes in Kiev have reached new levels of carnage and violence and the situation in Syria is no nearer to any sort of peaceful resolution. What then would you think if the protesters in Kiev suddenly abandoned their blockades, dropped all their bricks and stones and began embracing the Security Police? Or what would your reaction be to the combatants in Syria, if they simply made the decision to give up their enmity and end the violence forthwith? Amazement and a large helping of disbelief no doubt, but listen to these words: *I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.* Knowing the history of humanity as we do, and being aware of all the bloody and violent conflicts that have so disfigured our past, these words of Jesus from today's gospel reading seem at best naïve, and at worst foolhardy. Yet there they are in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, the great teaching of Jesus which is often cited as the Christian manifesto for how we should all live out our lives. Is Jesus being realistic? The gospel passage ends with Jesus telling us that we should be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect. What is it that he is saying?

Jesus was neither naïve nor foolhardy. He knew as well as anyone else the reality of living alongside those who hated and despised you. He knew the hardship of living under a foreign occupation and the harshness and inequality that such an existence imposed. He saw and experienced all the corruption and misuse of power that went with being subjected to Roman oversight and he felt pity and sorrow for the people who suffered as a consequence. Having seen and witnessed all this, his response was not to call upon an equivalent retribution as a retaliation, even though the Law expressed it as an appropriate solution, rather Jesus' call was to exercise something much more radical. Jesus directs each one of us towards the *imago Dei*, the image of God, in which we have all been created.

The perfect expression of God is love, and it is in the image of that perfect love that we have been made. Coming to an understanding of this draws certain realities into a clearer perspective. It is possible to attempt to make a policy out of the concept of equivalence; that somehow the idea of what I do to you and what you do to me can act as a restraint but reality seems to suggest otherwise. The more we progress, the more we develop and grow as societies and communities, the more we seem to demand in terms of resources and possessions. This has its own in built dynamic that often climaxes in disputes and conflicts which easily escalate out of control. Jesus is telling us not to limit the one gift we have that can overcome such a dynamic, namely the Father's love which is both boundless and limitless. The sad thing is that we continue to reject this gift and the cross is the evidence of that. In the passion Jesus offered the other cheek, he was taken to law and was stripped of not just tunic and cloak but of everything. The walk he made was not one or two miles, but a *via dolorosa* bearing the whole burden of suffering and oppression along the route, and his prayer for his persecutors was not one of retribution but one of forgiveness. The resurrection shows that we still have so much to learn about ourselves

Yes we may well feel that what Jesus is proposing is impossible, but it is only when in the knowledge of the resurrection, we open our hearts to truly live the limitless love of the Father, that what seems impossible becomes feasible.