

Critics who say that Christianity is a religion for wimps often cite today's Gospel. To many people, Christian is synonymous with pacifist. But that is a very superficial interpretation of scripture. We need to look deeper.

We have to remember that ancient Palestine was under an oppressive Roman rule. So we have to look at the context of Jesus' words to understand His teaching. For a right-handed person to strike another on the right cheek it would have to be a slap with the back of the hand. According to Jewish custom this was twice as insulting as being slapped with the palm of the hand. A backhanded slap was the blow of a superior to a subordinate.

Even the poorest people at the time had two tunics and by law they could be required to give up one tunic as legal reparation. But they could not be compelled to give up their cloak, which served as a coat during the day and a blanket at night.

Roman law allowed the occupying force to enlist natives as guides or pack bearers for a mile of any journey they were undertaking.

So what is Jesus really asking of us when He tells us to turn the other cheek, hand over our cloak, and go the extra mile? It is not about our response to violence or bullying with anger and more violence. It is about our response to oppression and humiliation with love and forgiveness.

For the past several weeks Jesus has been teaching us how to follow Him. We learned from the beatitudes the importance of humility. We learned that we must use our minds as well as our hearts in serving God. We learned that we have been given talents and abilities to serve God by helping our brothers and sisters. Today we learn to respond to our enemies by forgiving them. Again Jesus calls us to do more than the world expects of us. "The wisdom of this world is foolish in the eyes

of God.” We are expected to rise above our own petty feelings of anger and jealousy and respond with Christ-like love and forgiveness.

Mercy, compassion, forgiveness, these are not traits of weakness. In fact they are the very things responsible for the growth of Christianity over the entire world. The most powerful force for change in this world that is full of conflict and sin is not violence or vengeance; it is forgiveness.

The Roman Empire was built on force and violence but it fell over a thousand years ago. Christ’s Kingdom, the Church, is built on the deeper power of forgiveness and unconditional love. The Church has not only outlasted the Roman Empire but it is still growing today. It is the longest lasting institution in the history of the world, even longer lasting than the ancient Chinese Empires.

In the early days of the Church, when it was directly confronted by the violence and force of the Roman Empire, it was precisely the Christian ability to forgive and endure that made the Church grow while the empire crumbled.

The Romans would watch as Christians were tortured and executed. But no matter how unjustly the Christians were condemned, no matter how brutal or horrible their deaths were, they never condemned their enemies in return. They simply preached the Gospel and lived it out by following the example of Our Lord.

Jesus was unjustly condemned, tortured, brutalized, and finally executed in the most humiliating way His persecutors could imagine. He could have called armies of angels to defend Him and destroy his enemies. But what did He do? He endured. And as one of His last acts, He prayed that His executioners be forgiven.

The example of Jesus and of His followers has produced a steady stream of converts to the Christian faith, because the pagans had never witnessed such self-sacrificing nobility and courage.

According to a study by Open Doors USA, released in March of 2022, Christianity continues to be the most persecuted religion in the world. 360 million Christians last year lived in countries where persecution was “significant.” Roughly 6000 Christians were murdered for being Christian, more than 6,000 were detained or imprisoned, and another 4,000-plus were kidnapped. In addition, more than 5,000 churches and other religious facilities were destroyed.

But persecution has failed, over and over again, to suppress the faith. Christianity is still rapidly growing across the world.

Violence may win battles, but forgiveness wins wars, and hearts.

When we are wronged in some way, our natural inclination is to fight back, to get even. Needless to say, this reaction, though thoroughly human, is almost always in error. "Forgiveness is better than revenge, for forgiveness is the sign of a gentle nature, but revenge is the sign of a savage nature."

One example is the experience of a Hungarian refugee -- to protect his privacy we'll call him Joseph Kudar. Kudar was a successful young lawyer in Hungary before the uprisings in that country in 1956. A strong believer in freedom for his country, he fought Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest with his friends. When the uprising failed, he was forced to flee the country.

When Kudar arrived in the U.S. he had no money, no job, no friends. He was, however, well educated; he spoke and wrote several languages, including English.

For several months he tried to get a job in a law office, but because of his lack of familiarity with American law, he received only polite refusals.

Finally, it occurred to him that with his knowledge of language he might be able to get a job with an import-export company. He selected one such company and wrote a letter to the owner. Two weeks later he received an answer, but he was not prepared for the vindictiveness of the man's reply. Among other things, it said that even if they did need someone, they wouldn't hire him because he couldn't even write good English. Kudar's hurt quickly turned to anger. What right did this rude, arrogant man have to tell him he couldn't write the language! The man was obviously crude and uneducated -- his letter was chock-full of grammatical errors!

Kudar sat down and, in the anger of the moment, wrote a scathing reply, calculated to rip the man to shreds. When he'd finished, however, as he was reading it over, his anger began to fade. Then he remembered the biblical admonition, "A soft answer turns away wrath." No, he wouldn't mail the letter. Maybe the man was right. English was not his native tongue. Maybe he did need further study in it. Possibly this man had done him a favor by making him realize he did need to work harder on perfecting his English.

Kudar tore up the letter and wrote another. This time he apologized for the previous letter, explained his situation, and thanked the man for pointing out his need for further study. Two days later he received a phone call inviting him to New York for an interview. A week later he went to work for them as a correspondent. Later, Joseph Kudar became vice president and executive officer of the company, destined to succeed the man he had hated and sought revenge against for a fleeting moment -- and then resisted.

I'm sure there are times when we feel we are alone in our struggles. But truthfully, we are never alone. We do not need to rely on our own strength. We are not alone in our journey to the Father's house. Jesus is with us; Mary is with us; the saints and the angels are with us; the entire Church is with us. They teach us to love as God loves.

God is very Catholic in His love. If God is love He can hate nothing that He created. And Jesus, His only son, makes this known to us in human terms. God's justice is not an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." God does not love halfway; he loves totally, completely and universally. He loves enough to sacrifice Himself for us.

It has been said that "Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die."

When we give into bitterness, hatred and a desire for vengeance, we give in to the evil one, and we lose the power of God's grace at work in our hearts. And that grace is the only power that can break the cycle of violence, conquer evil, and change the world. It is the only power of forgiveness that can bring resurrections out of crucifixions.

So the next time somebody offends you, angers you, or hurts you, remember that this too is person for whom Christ died and respond as He would have you do, forgive them.