

Gentle

[1] Matt 11²⁸⁻³⁰/ Matt 12¹⁵⁻²¹/ Eph 4²⁹⁻³², 5¹/ Prov 15¹

On the verge of entering Level 4 lockdown the prime minister Jacinda Arden addressed the nation and said these words...

[2] “Go home tonight and check on your neighbours, start a phone tree with your street, plan how you'll stay in touch with one another. We will get through this together, but only if we stick together so please be strong and be kind.”

Be kind to each other...

I wonder if you've got someone in your life who you remember with great fondness – someone whose memory doesn't just make you smile but actually brings peace to your soul? Someone from whom you can hardly ever remember a cross word passing their lips; someone whose warmth you could count on: someone who never made you feel judged or inadequate or less of a person: someone who made you want to keep living.

[3] I have a few people like that in my soul. One is my paternal grandmother – a person who I really only saw once a year when we visited her home at Christmas time. She wasn't a person who did special things for me – you know... bought me treats or expensive toys or anything like that. She didn't hug me much

and she wasn't a person to sit and listen for hours - **but she never belittled me in any way and she was always pleased to see and she never, at least that I can remember, told me off.**

She was, in a word, **kind**. She was also gentle, and she was loving. She was also a very committed Christian having grown up in a manse, the house of a Presbyterian Minister father who had begun life as a missionary in Nigeria and then had emigrated to New Zealand where he ministered for the rest of his life in the South Island. He died early, before retirement, of all things, of malaria! I had the great privilege, just before she died, of telling her that I was a Christian. She was deeply affected by a stroke at that point but I think she understood.

Kindness is compulsory for Christians because above all else God is kind. **[4]** We don't get to say we've developed the character of Christ unless we are known as kind people. The very heart of Christ is kindness; kindness that will not let us go even though we are determined to rebel against him; kindness that clings to the foulest of sinners and the most ignorant of unbelievers; kindness that will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. And kindness begins with gentleness...

[5] In perhaps the key verse in the Gospels for understanding who Jesus was we find Him calling to people to follow him because he was... '**gentle and humble in heart,**' Those two words are vital for an understanding the kind of character we are to develop as we mature in Christ. This is what we are heading for – this is what we strive for in our character – someone who is humble and gentle in heart. Someone who is

not a threat to those around him; someone who is approachable by the shyest of people.

And we know that Jesus was like this because of the people he attracted. Those cast out from society felt brave enough to approach him, why? Because they felt sure he wasn't going to reject them. [6] So he attracted prostitutes and lepers, the blind, deaf and dumb, those paralysed and those polarized, those who were socially challenged and those who were children. And they all came because Jesus was gentle and He was kind.

They knew they weren't going to get another lecture from a righteous person from Him. They knew they weren't going to be made smaller than they already felt. They knew they weren't going to feel the sting of rejection or the stain of accusation from Him. They knew that He was love incarnate and when you meet love the only thing you feel is accepted. And let me say this very clearly – if you want a person to deal with their sin they must know first that they are loved as they are – with all their mistakes and failings and foibles.

The Son of Man died for a people who were still in their sins – he gave Himself in the greatest act of love the universe has ever seen for a people who were still sinners. What does the Gospel say? [7] **'While we were yet sinners... Christ died for us!'**

Not after we'd sorted ourselves out. Not while we were getting cleaned up. Not when we'd said some special words and prayed a special prayer – no! Before all that. **While we were still sinners! And nothing has changed.**

[8] People must know we care before they'll care about what we know! Yes we all know that the end game is confession and repentance but the beginning of the game is always love and gentleness.

What is clear is that gentleness is a sign of maturity. Martin Luther said, **[9] 'The higher people are in the favour of God, the more tender they are.'** And this, is, of course, one of the key strategies in a society which has fundamentally rejected gentleness in favour of cynicism and doubt. Let me read you this quote from Dallas Willard because I think it says it all really. In it Willard claims that it is a huge test of character for us to be gentle like God is gentle because our culture has been on a trajectory for 100's of year towards something quite the opposite of gentleness...

[10] "The test of character posed by the gentleness of God's approach to us is especially dangerous for those formed by the ideas that dominate our modern world. We live in a culture that has, for centuries now, cultivated the idea that the *sceptical* person is always smarter than one who believes. You can be almost as stupid as a cabbage, as long as you *doubt*. The fashion of the age has identified mental sharpness with a pose, not with genuine intellectual method and character. Only a very hardy individualist or social rebel -- or one desperate for another life -- therefore stands any chance of discovering the substantiality of the spiritual life today. Today it is the sceptics who are the social conformists, though because of powerful

intellectual propaganda they continue to enjoy thinking of themselves as wildly individualistic and unbearably bright.”

So where have you allowed your scepticism and cynicism to overflow into a rank rejection of the another because of their views or possibly even their lack of a view.

This is the first challenge to our gentleness – **[11]** taking a humble approach to those we believe to be wrong. Not looking to dominate or to segregate or to ridicule them for their opinion but to listen and to suggest an alternative – gently.

[12] The second challenge is to exam the internal process by which gentleness is excluded from our behaviour and this all begins by dealing with what’s in the mind. But how? How do we change our minds? How do we change our feelings?

Can I say to you – if your default reaction to others is one of harshness you have a problem with gentleness. If you continually interpret others as attempting to take advantage of you, you have a problem with gentleness. If your relationships are marked by ongoing conflict, you are likely to have a problem with gentleness.

You see gentleness begets gentleness and kindness begets kindness. Now don’t get me wrong – neither gentleness or kindness will change a bully but they will change those who aren’t. The same is true within ourselves. **[13]** The more gentle we are – the more gentle we become. What we do forms and

informs our thinking. That's why Christian action is so important.

A woman seeking counsel from Dr. George W. Crane, the renowned psychologist, confided that she hated her husband, and intended to divorce him. "I want to hurt him all I can," she declared firmly. "Well, in that case," said Dr. Crane, "I advise you to start showering him with compliments. When you have become indispensable to him, when he thinks you love him devotedly, then start the divorce action. That is the way to really hurt him." Some months later the wife returned to report that all was going well. She had followed the suggested course. "Good," said Dr. Crane. "Now's the time to file for divorce." "Divorce!" the woman said indignantly. **[14]** "Never. I love my husband dearly!"

How often we think that our actions follow our thoughts when the truth of it is that our thoughts so often follow our actions. We feel trapped by **[15]** our thoughts and feelings often and we forget that if we would only commit to a different course **of action** our thoughts and feelings will eventually follow. This is so true of marriage. Marriage is designed to wear the very best natural emotions. When we marry we are generally still very much in love and though most couples will have dealt with a little bit of conflict they will still have to deal with the much more potent enemy – a flat battery! **[16]**

When we run out of the initial emotions of love; when we begin to see only the negative things about our wife or husband; when we simply end up not liking the person we married – we

have a flat battery and the only way to get that charged again is to get the motor going again and the only way to do that without a battery is to push-start the car – to get it going in the right direction until the engine kicks onto life. In short we act the way we want to feel! **[17]**

Friends, our witness starts with our action and the action of Jesus was to be gentle and to show kindness. I don't care how much theology you know – none of it will be of any use unless your first instinct upon meeting the most despicable of lost people isn't to be kind and to be gentle.

So let me leave you with this challenge – **[18]** 'Lord, fill me with the gentleness of Jesus so that I might be the very best witness to your power and person. In Jesus Name. AMEN'