

A time to love and a time to hate.

I don't recall ever hearing a sermon about hate.

Jesus taught we should love our enemies and pray for them so there is no room for hate in a Christian.

So in what way is there a time to love and a time to hate?

I discovered that the word love crops up 740 times in the bible and while typing in the command to search for the word hate I thought it would be a tiny number by comparison. I was wrong – it crops up 194 times.

As I was checking out some of the references, I came across the kind of hate we can understand and we might have felt ourselves.

Esau hated his brother Jacob – you will remember that Jacob deceived their father and stole the blessing that should have been Esau's; so Esau hated his brother.

Joseph was hated by his brothers. Joseph had the multi-coloured coat, he was Dad's favourite, he had dreams where they all bowed down to him. Had I been Joseph's brother – I probably would have hated him.

There are plenty of examples, both individuals hating each other or on a national scale like in the book of Esther.

Clearly it's this kind of hatred Jesus spoke against – so what is good hate?

The first example in the bible comes in the instructions to Moses who was looking to appoint leaders among the Israelites.

*He was to look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and **hate** dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers.*

Hate is an extreme emotion – there's no other word greater than hate, it's right at the end of the scale. It's this extreme intolerance towards wrongdoing that is encouraged.

In the example given, any man who hates dishonest gain cannot be bribed and will make a fair minded and good officer.

The time and place for hatred is towards those attributes against which we should stand firm, dishonesty, lying, abuse, corruption, bribery and so on.

The problem is, these are all things that people do. How do we respond to people when we hate their actions?

This is the time to love. Love is the answer towards anyone, however hateful their actions. I will not though, ever suggest this is easy.

You will have encountered occasions where the word hate is used but is really of little consequence and is the wrong word anyway.

Slide – Garden peas

I have a daughter who hates peas and it turns out she's not the only one.

Second slide – peas!!

The other daughter hates fish.

Slide – from finding Nemo "fish are friends not food"

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My son hates any left over meal that has been microwaved, his poetic description of this is "rancid muck".

Like most families – this is the level at which we encounter "hate" or at least where the word is used.

Food that the kids hate, they hate going to the dentist, they hate having their hair brushed and on and on it goes.

But then they encounter problems at school or with friends and the word hate is used to describe someone else – and if your child is being bullied, deep inside you feel you hate the bully too.

It's when we start to hate a person the challenge matters – how do we love those whose actions we hate?

In his writing, St. John starts close to home

²⁰ Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

If we aspire to be loving towards those whose actions we hate, there's more likelihood we will need to practice on our brothers and sisters, both actual family and those in the church family than some unspecified enemy.

The difficulty is separating out the actions of a person from the person themselves (particularly if its family) and as I was mulling that over, a daily reading that we use at morning prayer was helpful. This month we are learning and discussing thoughts from the desert Mothers – that group of women who, just like the men, practised their faith in the isolation of the desert.

Amma Syncletica says, "why hate a person who hurts you, for it is not that person who is unjust, but the devil. Hate the sickness not the person".

Sinful actions described as sickness!

Now I wanted to take issue with this because surely we all have some personal responsibility for our actions, but I was rather undermined by the apostle Paul.

In a passage from Romans chapter 7 he speaks about the war going on within himself.

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. . ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

This is a theological understanding, that the actions we are to hate are rooted in the sin that lives within each person.

But our emotions are from the heart and it's very very difficult to separate the sin from the person and we blame, accuse and hate the person who has hurt us.

Just as St. Paul feels helpless to prevent his own sinful actions, we might feel helpless. How on earth can we be loving towards those whose actions we hate and more importantly may have hurt those we love?

First we remember that God is love and that love comes from God.

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We recognise that we cannot accomplish the love of Christ unless God grants us the love we seek, once again we come to God asking for his love and grace to be poured into our lives.

Secondly we acknowledge our own failings. St John says. God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God loved us when there was nothing in us to be loved. Only when we have the humility to recognise our own failings, can we begin to have compassion for others.

The third step may be a single step or a life time journey of learning to forgive the sinner. If we can find room in our hearts to want to love, and want to forgive even as we hate the sin committed, God will not stop giving us the grace and strength we need.

Christ is our supreme example. When Jesus was being nailed to the cross he says "Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing". He hated the sin, he loved the sinner.

Whether it's your own story, or the story of the church there will have been times of love and times of hate, where actions and decisions have stirred up the most extreme of emotions. Into the cauldron of our hurt and confusion Christ comes with his own scarred hands and feet.

Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and only he can forgive sin. We are called to forgive the sinner. We say it in our prayer -

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

This is the pathway, where the time to love is hand in hand with the time to hate. When we take the bravest of steps to forgive

even though we maintain a steadfast hatred of sin – then, the kingdom of Heaven is glimpsed in this place.