INTRODUCTION

Anyone who sets out to read the Gospels seriously will soon discover before he gets very far that they are actually reading him. The Scriptures in general and the Gospels in particular have an uncanny way of probing the thoughts and the intents of the human heart. Living word that it is, it soon involves us in confrontation, confession and hopefully decision. It's not difficult to see why C. S. Lewis always visualized Jesus taller than himself.

I've been rooming for the last few days in a rather intimate way with one of the most searching words that Jesus ever spoke:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also".

AGAINST VENGEANCE

We have here a devastating broadside against vengeance. Vengeance: one of the oldest and most pernicious dispositions that the spirit of man can harbor.

It's a recurring theme in the literature of the world. Long ago, the Psalmist of Israel was heard to cry:

"O Lord, thou God of vengeance, thou God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; render to the proud their deserts. O Lord, how long shall the wicked exult?"

Hamlet is a tragedy of revenge. The young prince expends his life avenging his father's death. Something was rotten in Denmark. "The time is out of joint" he cried, "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right". Vengeance is the dominant theme or passion in Melville's Moby Dick. Vengeance is as up to date as today's paper and helps to explain some of what we read.

It wasn't too long ago that the story broke about a man who had been working for twenty-three years for the Railway Express Agency as a plainclothes guard. It seemed that twelve years ago his mother passed away. The company, in his judgement, was not properly sympathetic. So, night after night, he stole from the company in a mood of revenge. And when the police broke through he had seven rifles, two shot guns, one machine gun, two thousand rounds of ammunition, many thousand dollars worth of jewelry, rare coins, power tools, clothing, radios and other equipment. The loot was three feet deep over every inch of his three-room apartment. Two large trucks were needed to tow it away. All of this because the company had not been sympathetic.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'". Of course you've heard it. We've all heard it. Our own hearts have said it. The urge to get even is a perennial temptation. Grudgitis is a common failing among us all....the desire to settle scores, to act in the place of a too-slow God, to be judge and jury all in one.

Lawyers, psychiatrists and ministers can all testify to the prevalence of vengeance in our society: vengeance against a brother who got a large share of the family estate; against a business partner who took unfair advantage; against
It was Peter who one day asked Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" "As many as seven times?" Remember the answer of Jesus. "I do not say to you seven times! - but seventy times seven!" In other words, indefinitely.

Jesus prayed, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Not that there's a "quid-pro-quo" here - that God only forgives as we forgive. But the assumption rather than unless we have learned how to forgive another, we haven't learned to receive forgiveness for ourselves. Francis Bacon once remarked,

"By taking revenge a man is but even with his enemy...but by passing over it, he is supreme."

CLOSING Yes, the Scriptures have a way of reading us. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you, do not resist one who is evil". This is high ground we are standing on. And it can be so difficult to achieve. We wonder, who can ever possibly reach it in a world filled with so much violence, rancor, illwill. Socrates once said, "Knowledge is wisdom". Years later, Aristotle answered back, "Yes...but now about the passions". It is high ground, so hard to practice, but we are called to try.

Years ago a distinguished minister in Boston numbered among his flock an individual who kept up a running vendetta against him. This parishioner was responsible for poison pen letters, mysterious harassing calls, little cliques of opposition, open movements to dismiss the man from his post. The person was always under-cutting his efforts. Presently this member moved to the West Coast. And there under more tranquil circumstances and perhaps under the pressure of advancing years and the quiet of a broad, expansive sky, her heart gradually became more penitent. She wrote back to ask pardon of the man whose trail she had dogged for so many years. His response was in the form of a telegram three words long: "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever". "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever".

That's the spirit Jesus would have his followers. Soon the world will grow quite to gaze on that man on the cross who was heard to utter in his final moments, "Father. Forgive them. For they know not what they do." Here is our model. Here is our empowerment. Vengeance is wrong. Forgiveness is right.

PRAYER Lord, we do have a way of remembering so many things that we ought to forget. So often we end up forgetting what we should remember. Free us from bitterness, from vengeance. Let your love flow through us. Help us to be willing in our lives to "forgive, forget, forever". In the spirit of Jesus. Amen
For the person of vengeance, every sunset is bleached of color; every meal is rendered bland; every dream is cankered; every relationship is soured. Vengeance stops prayer, represses joy, mis-directs energy, robs the years of their productivity and crowns old age with a thorny wreath of bitterness.

FUTILE Moreover, vengeance is futile. Evil is not the true answer to evil. It never was and never will be. Vengeance simply perpetuates the cycles of sin-against, hate; sin-against, hate; sin-against, hate. Better that we should meet the one who offended us with kindness, even on pragmatic grounds. Hence, Paul could write to the Christians in the city of Rome:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head".

There's even testimony to this truth in such an unlikely place as the novel Alfie. Alfie is busy deceiving the many women in his life, using them for his pleasures and planning all the while to drop them when he's had enough of them. When one responds with genuine affection, Alfie muses:

"I thought: while you've been thinking bad of her, Alfie, she's been thinking good of you. It gives you a shock, see, when you've been putting the poison in for somebody in your mind, and you find out they've been putting the honey in for you".

REDUCES TRUST Still more, this attitude of vengeance, when you stop to think about it, leads eventually to a denial of a trust in God. It's an easy matter for us to stamp our coins "In God We Trust" - but when we take matters into our own hands and seek to execute judgment we are, in effect, saying that we can't depend upon God to do this for us.

Back there in the Book of Genesis, someone once asked, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" - not only by the nations of the world, but also by those petty hurts that tear and crush the human heart? "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Do you really believe in the Ways of God? Do you really believe that "whatsoever a man sows that will he also reap?" Does not the adulterer suffer because he is moving against the very structure of the universe? Does the man who steals really have it as easy as your eye would make it out to be?

A fanatic has been defined as "one who does what God would do if He had the facts". We keep slipping into the robes of God under the assumption that he doesn't have the necessary facts, that he really doesn't know how bad our enemy is.

FORGIVENESS Even more important, the reason why vengeance is wrong is because something else is right. And that something else I speak of now is forgiveness.

Anyone who knows anything at all about professional hockey knows the name of Eddie Shore, for years one of the most feared defenseman in the sport. A man who across the years of his playing career received more than six hundred stitches in his face. A number of years ago Mr. Shore received an award in our city. One reporter happened to note that Mr. Shore's face was as smooth as a baby's. The reason. He massaged his wounds. Every wound in the face took about three years, but with steady rubbing and the right ointment the scars all went away. Some people
a former spouse who walked out; against a son or a daughter who disgraced the family name. The little webs of spite are commonplace in our corporations, our offices, our homes and even, on occasion, in our churches. What we need are teflon coated memories on which no slight sticks and where wounds are soon forgotten.

**MIND OF CHRIST IS CLEAR**

If the mind of Christ is clear on anything, it is clear on this. We who carry His name are not to meet evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good. Paul understood this. To the Christians in Rome, he said: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God". And in Corinthians where he celebrates love, Paul reminds the infant church that "love never keeps records of wrongs".

Whether and how far this counsel is applicable to the political state has been debated without let-up since the days of Jesus. God is concerned that justice be upheld as well as that love be practiced. One of the functions of the state is to establish justice and enforce it, and this requires the exercise of power.

But even there in the quest for justice vengeance has no place. Surely it is possible to set about the business of righting wrong without being controlled by a spirit of revenge. How this can be done is one of the most urgent matters facing us in society today. How can we express righteous indignation without passing over into vengeance which is not of God? Dorothy Sayers tried to help us at this point when she said,

"You may know the mischief maker by the warped malignancy of his face and voice. His fury is without restraint and without magnanimity -- and it is aimed not at checking the offense, but at starting a pogrom against the offender. He would rather the evil were not cured at all than that it were cured quietly and without violence. His evil lust of wrath cannot be sated unless somebody is hounded down, beaten and trampled on, and a savage war-dance executed upon the body".

I'm inclined to believe that what Jesus has given us here in the Sermon on the Mount was never intended for an ethical system as we understand that term. Rather he was describing what a life would look like that was fully committed to God. And I think - and this is debatable - if Jesus is legislating at all, He is legislating here for the inward spirit of man.

What is not debatable is the conviction that Christians are called to a "life style" that is totally free of vengeance. In other words, a wrong done to you does not give you license to inflict a wrong on somebody else. And the wisdom behind this counsel is visible from different angles. Let's look at two or three of them for a few moments in order of their ascending importance.

**HARMFUL**

First of all, and most obvious, vengeance is harmful. It is harmful to the avenger, as well as to the avengee. Jesus absolutely negates hatred as inhuman and vengeance always rises out of hatred. It produces in the human heart a disorganizing anxiety and displaces those positive dispositions where our well-being lies.

Eldridge Cleaver, writing several years ago in *Soul on Ice*, said, "The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less".
"JESUS AND VENGEANCE"

INTRODUCTION The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year have been attempting to examine the mind of Christ on a variety of subjects. Wealth, prayer, service, what it means to be human - these are some of the concerns that we have been thinking about in the sermons on the Sunday mornings of Lent this year. Today, on this the Fifth Sunday of Lent, Passion Sunday, we turn to the subject of Jesus and vengeance.

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Wasn't it Peter who one day asked Jesus, "How oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" "As many as seven times?" Jesus said, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven". In other words, indefinitely. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Not that there is a quid pro quo here, that God only forgives as we forgive. But rather the assumption that unless we have learned how to forgive another, we haven't learned to receive forgiveness for ourselves. Francis Bacon once remarked:

"By taking revenge a man is but even with his enemy; but by passing over it, he is supreme".

CLOSING Yes, "you have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but now I say unto, do not resist one who is evil." This is high ground we are standing on. So difficult to achieve. Who can reach it in a world that is crowded with rancor and illwill. Socrates said, "Knowledge is wisdom". Years late Aristotle answered back, "Yes, but now about the passions". It's significant that we should be speaking of vengeance on Passion Sunday. We must meet passion with a passion.

Years ago a distinguished minister in the city of Boston numbered among his congregants an individual who kept up a running vendetta against him. This parishioner was responsible for poison pen letters, mysterious calls, little cliques of opposition, open movements to dismiss the man from his post. Presently this member moved to the American west. There under more tranquil circumstances and, perhaps, under the pressure of advancing years and the quiet of a broad, expansive sky, her heart gradually became more penitent. She wrote back to ask pardon of the man whose trail she had dogged for so many years. His response was in the form of a telegram three words long, "Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever".

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Resolve to practice forgiveness. And the heart of it all is that cross where Jesus was heard to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do". Here is our model. Here is our empowerment. "....'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth'....but I say unto you, do not resist one who is evil".

PRAYER Lord, we do have a way of remembering what we ought to forget, and of forgetting what we ought to remember. We need not new techniques, but a new heart fashioned after Thine. Free us, we pray thee, from every trace of bitterness and of vengeance and the hatered on which it feeds. All of this that love and goodwill may yet be enthroned in us and in our world. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen

Remember: at the heart of it all is that cross from where Jesus was heard to cry, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do".
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
AT 9-6997

CHURCH DIRECTORY
Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke.................................. Minister
Dr. Harold C. Metzner.............................. Associate Minister, Emeritus
Rev. William B. Lawrence.......................... Assistant Minister
Mr. Lyndon Woodside........................... Organist-Choir Director
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GENERAL OFFICERS
Lay Member, Annual Conference............... Mr. Paul R. Russell
Lay Leader, The Church......................... Dr. George Hull
President, Board of Trustees................ Mr. Paul R. Russell
President, Women's Society................ Mrs. Raymond Carey
Head Usher................................... Mr. Robert A. Raeburn
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Chairman, Council on Ministries.......... Miss Marilyn Bruhn
Education Commission Chairman............. Mrs. David Buckman
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AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Community Room after the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warm fellowship made possible for us today by Mrs. Tyler, Mrs. Blackton, Miss Heelscher, Mrs. Mannucci, Mrs. Shannon and Miss Shepard.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar are given in memory of Robert Kenneth Shannon by his wife, Jane Clark Shannon.

USHERS

Today's ushers are Mr. Brown, Mr. Bierbaum, Mr. Harley, Mr. Hughes, Mr. Merkey, Mr. Sieg and Mr. Smith.

CHILD CARE SERVICE

Nursery care for infants and toddlers is provided on the fourth floor from ten-thirty to twelve-thirty.

NEW MEMBERS TO JOIN

New Members will be received next Sunday morning, April 4th. Persons interested in membership are invited to meet with Mr. Clarke this evening at 7:30 pm.

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
March 28, 1971
ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A.M.

ORGAN "Sonata In E Flat" Mozart

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 55 "Praise To The Lord, The Almighty"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

O God our Father, who hast set forth the way of life for us in thy beloved Son; we confess with shame our slowness to learn of Him, our reluctance to follow Him. Thou hast spoken and called, and we have not given heed; thy beauty hath shone forth, and we have been blind; thou hast stretched out thy hands to us through our fellows, and we have passed by. Forgive us our transgressions; help us to amend our ways and in thine eternal goodness direct what we shall be, in the name and power of thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

***

PSALTER

"Great Is The Lord" No. 602

GLORIA PATRI

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH No. 740

***

ANTHEM "Dies Irae" (Requiem) Mozart

Matthew 5: 38 - 48

PASTORAL PRAYER

ANNOUNCEMENT OF CONGREGATIONAL CONCERNS

ANTHEM "Lacrymosa" (Requiem) Mozart

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 475 "Turn Back, O Man"

SERMON "Jesus And Vengeance" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 235 "Dear Lord And Father Of Mankind"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "Fugue In B Minor" Bach

*** Interval for Ushering

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