

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
(Romans 12:17)**

What do the following actors have in common: Sean Connery, Daniel Craig, George Lazenby, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan and Roger Moore? The answer is, of course, that they have all played 007, aka James Bond, Her Majesty's secret agent, who is sent off on tasks to save the civilised world from the threat of an evil enemy, usually intent on world domination. I suspect that most of us will have at some time seen a James Bond movie and watched with admiration as Bond manages to escape moments of imminent death on many occasions aided by Q's ingenious gadgets designed to outwit the baddies. When I was small my favourite and much-loved toy was a gold Aston Martin Bond car complete with ejector seat and firing missiles.

With the latest Bond film (*No Time to Die*) just about to be released in November this year, I have been pondering on what is it that makes Bond such an enduring character. Well, obviously he's on the side of good and he's a bit of a rebel as he doesn't always obey orders from Whitehall; he never loses his cool, he's suave and always well-dressed.

But there is also a very dubious side to Bond's character which we admire, perhaps, because we know – or should know, that deep down it is immoral. Besides his string of 'Bond-girls' his chief characteristic is that he carries out numerous acts of violent revenge.

Obviously, those whom Bond kills or disposes of deserve it, and we get a kind of satisfaction that justice has been delivered. Revenge, as the saying goes, is best served cold. Revenge doesn't have to be carried out at the James Bond level, but there are numerous small ways in which we plot and imagine acts of revenge and sometimes we do them: the neighbour's dog is barking, so we turn up the TV to annoy them; a work-colleague never answers our emails so we never answer theirs; a student takes other people's milk from the shared fridge so we replace it with sour milk.

But think again about the Bond character. Almost everything about him is false. He may appear suave but he never has proper relationships; he is unmoved by the numerous killings he has to carry out in the line of duty; he has a very black and white view of justice.

Maybe we are attracted or even fascinated by Bond because he is the antithesis to everything which Jesus and therefore St Paul stood for.

In my sermon last week I argued, based on St Paul's Letter to the Romans, that there are no Christian ethics, only Christians who act ethically. Christian ethics are founded on faith, that is a commitment to God who is the creator and source of life – 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28) as Paul said in his speech in Athens. So, in this week's reading from Romans 12 having established this, St Paul is now able to spell out more clearly what this means in everyday life.

At the heart of living in Christ, says St Paul, is a very simple idea: hate evil and do good (12:9). This sounds like, something James Bond would approve of, but it is in fact completely different. To do good cannot be achieved through evil; the ends do not justify the means. This is so because living in Christ means seeing other people, however despicable, as fellow human beings. The Greek word used by St Paul is 'philadelphia' – literally brotherly love (12:10), or as translated here 'mutual affection'. We know that as soon as we see our enemy as a fellow human, whether the enemy is an irritating neighbour, idle colleague, or selfish student, then our desire for revenge has to be reformed. How? Well Paul says, we are called to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer (12:12).

So, quite naturally being in Christ leads to acting in Christ. But of course, it is quite one thing to know what to do and actually to do it. St Paul quotes almost word for word from Jesus' teaching the Sermon on the Mount which describes the personal qualities which make us worthy to be made in the image of God.

The qualities which Paul selects are those which directly oppose the desire for revenge. We are to bless those that persecute us, feed those we regard as our enemies, resist repaying evil with evil, and avoid seeing ourselves as morally superior to others.

Now, you may think this is all well and good, but can this actually work in practice? Aren't there times when it would be irresponsible not to resist our enemies?

There are some Christians who think that resistance of our enemies is sometimes necessary, but it never justifies the use of violence. War is not an option.

I'm not sure. I think there are times when war as a last resort might be justified, not motivated by revenge but in the pursuit of peace. This does not make war in itself good, simply the least worst option. In a complex and difficult world there are times when the state and we as Christians have to act with 'dirty hands'. This is very far removed from the James Bond world where good and evil are so black and white that violence against evil is justified.

But perhaps I am wrong and maybe it is that I lack sufficient faith in the God who says 'vengeance is mine' not yours. I am struck by the words of Mahatma Gandhi who found inspiration for his non-violent resistance in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

It is my conviction that the root of evil is want of a living faith in a living God. It is a first-class human tragedy that peoples of the earth who claim to believe in the message of Jesus who they describe as the Prince of Peace show little of that belief in actual practice. (*Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings* p 42)

Even if I am not sure about the use of war, one thing I can be sure of is that the desire for revenge, however trivial, is the root of evil and contrary to the life of faith.