

Jesus often used poetry in his teaching. The Beatitudes, for example, with their antiphonal form: the poor will be rich, the hungry will be fed, the grieving shall be comforted. Today's gospel reading comes from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, where the Beatitudes are placed.

He used poetic metaphor too: because it isn't actually possible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, or a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. We use this kind of dramatic metaphorical exaggeration all the time:

*He was over the moon...*

*My heart was in my mouth...*

*She was on cloud nine...*

None of these things are physically possible, but we know exactly what they mean. When Jesus says: 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well', is he being literal? Probably not. After all, during his trial, when one of the high priest's guards struck him on the side of face, did he offer the other side too? No. What he did was ask: 'Why do you strike me?' When Jesus said that if our right hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off, was he being literal? I

certainly hope not – otherwise there wouldn't be many bits of me left.

So we understand that Jesus often used poetic metaphor, poetic license, I guess you could say, to make his point. And his point is that the old traditions are often wrong: for example, an eye for an eye, as Mahatma Gandhi says, just results in the whole world being blind. He uses poetic license to present a new and radical way of looking at things. It is obvious when Jesus speaks literally and concretely: 'love your neighbor as yourself' – there's nothing poetic or metaphorical about that.

In Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us that we must be children of the Most High, 'who himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.' Matthew puts it in a different way, and says that we must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Now, we might be forgiven for imagining that this perfection means being like a saint in a plaster niche – which would be quite impossible for me... if I tried that, I'd end up more neurotic than I already am. But, thank God, that's not what being perfect means. In both Matthew and Luke, the Lord Jesus tells us that

perfection means to treat everybody equally, just as God does.

When someone looks around and sees nothing to their satisfaction, when someone is hyper-critical, and upsets us by being completely negative, or mealy-mouthed, or offensive, or unkind and unhelpful, or just plain rude... if we can treat that person as understandingly as we treat anyone else, then I am a child of God; if we can be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, then we are a mirror reflecting a glimpse of divine perfection. Most significantly of all, we can only be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, we can only treat just and unjust people alike, if we are kind to ourselves *first* – especially when we are ungrateful, wicked, or unjust. If we don't have compassionate for ourselves and all our inadequacies, we will never have compassion for others and their inadequacies. This is such a basic, critical, psychological and spiritual truth that Jesus states it over and over: 'Love your neighbor *as yourself*.' It just doesn't happen otherwise.