President Abraham Lincoln, like all public figures and like maybe all
human beings for that matter, had his enemies. But Lincoln was famous
for wanting to be as good to his enemies as possible. He is the one who
wanted to “bind up the nation’s wounds” after the Civil War. It is clear
from the historical record that he wanted to be easy on the south after that
horribly bloody and destructive conflict. But his untimely assassination
opened the door for extremists in his own party to implement a very tough
“Reconstruction” (as it was called) in the states that rebelled. I think it is
fair to say that the resentment caused by this harshness still haunts us
today. The Civil War is far from over. The lingering sectionalism and
racism that plague our country might have been softened or obliterated
completely if Honest Abe had had his way.

During the midst of the war and his political battles, one of Lincoln’s
advisors confronted him for being too soft on his enemies. Lincoln
famously responded: Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my
friends?” Perhaps he knew instinctively what a man named Orson Scott
Card (1951–), a modern science fiction writer penned in his novel Ender’s
Game (1985): “In the moment when I truly understand my enemy,
understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also
love him. I think it’s impossible to really understand somebody, what they
want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves.
And then, in that very moment when I love them … I, [in a good way,] destroy them [because they are no longer my enemy].”

Martin Luther King Jr. said this: “Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says: “Love your enemies.”” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.”

(From Loving your enemies) Or as my spiritual director once advised me when I was having hard feelings toward someone: pray for him and those feelings will go away. I did pray for him and the feelings soon faded.

Jesus practiced what he preached. It is safe to say that no one ever loved his enemies so sincerely. He said from the cross: “Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23: 34). Because Jesus is the most innocent of victims, he inspires empathy among humankind and (hopefully) among Christians in particular for all victims – even those who have been responsible for terrible slaughter but now are themselves suffering. Perhaps you have heard of Ian Paisley (1926-2014) who was the staunch leader of the Unionist party which represented the Protestants in Northern Ireland during the so-called “troubles” there over several
decades in the latter part of the twentieth century. There is no doubt that by his venomous speech and actions, Paisley was responsible for the suffering and death of many Catholics. Well in 2007, he and the leader of the main Catholic party in Northern Ireland entered into an historic agreement to share power. This Catholic leader of the party known as Sinn Fein was Martin McGuinness and both he and Sinn Fein had plenty of blood on their hands too. But Paisley and McGuinness went from sworn enemies to fast friends in an amazingly short time and their friendship spelled peace at last in their country. Ian Paisley died in 2014 and Martin McGuinness was a great comfort to Paisley and his family as he declined in health and passed away. This is a great example of empathy.

Today’s gospel from St. Matthew is the parable of the vineyard – and the vineyard symbolizes Israel. This passage comes right after Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday. This parable is full of violence. And Jesus is telling us here that like the prophets of old represented by the first waves of men the landowner sent to collect his rent, he (Jesus) the son and “the heir” is also about to be mercilessly tortured and executed. Those who persecuted him, the religious leaders of the Jews, rejected his message of love and forgiveness because his Good News did not fit into their plan to maintain their own power over the people in the vineyard of Israel. St. Matthew in this passage describes in the form of a parable the sweeping history of how the ancestors of these leaders massacred the prophets who had proclaimed the truth of God’s love and justice. This Gospel also reminds us that, in the
end, God will judge all who have maliciously refused to accept God’s love and to live lives of humble service.

As we are reminded daily, we live in a violent world and country where there are so many divisions and hatreds. But for Jesus there clearly was no “us” against “them” – except in our own hearts where God’s grace contends with the evil we are tempted to do. In modern terms, there would be for Jesus no Christians versus Muslims, no Israelis versus Palestinians, no black versus white, no Latino versus Anglo, no male versus female, no documented immigrant versus undocumented immigrant, no gay versus straight, no rich versus poor, no Republican versus Democrat, no traditional Catholic versus progressive Catholic. Jesus taught that our neighbor is everyone—especially anyone who is hurting. We are called to understand and appreciate the pain of those who hurt even if we might be tempted to think they deserve it. In fact, it is not too far-fetched to say that empathy for victims is Christianity’s key virtue. And when there is no empathy and no compassion, there is easy violence. May today’s Gospel help us to understand that Jesus as victim stands for all who are mistreated and hated. May his example help us to get over the divisions that are dehumanizing our world and our country and communities, our families and even our own hearts!

Jesus’ rejection led to his glorious Resurrection. As the people of the Resurrection, we have the solemn duty always to see things in a new way and thus to imitate the Christ who came for everyone – not just the folks who are most like us!