

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples, "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 an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

REFLECTION 1: FORGIVING OUR ENEMIES

Corrie ten Boom was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. After the war she toured Europe giving talks, urging rival nations to forgive one another. One night after a talk in Munich a man came up and extended his hand in a gesture of reconciliation. He was one of the most hated guards in the camp she'd been in. She couldn't take his hand: she prayed, 'Jesus! Help me I can't forgive him! Instantly some higher power helped her to clasp his hand in forgiveness. That night Corrie learned a great truth. The same Jesus who taught us to love our enemies empowers us to do it. All we need do is to ask for that power. As John Kaspar Lavater remarked: 'Who has not forgiven an enemy has not yet tasted one of the most sublime enjoyments in life'.

In today's Gospel (Matt. 5: 38-48) Jesus is represented as trying to instil a similar holiness in his disciples. In order to accept and to commit to Jesus' teachings about non-violence, forgiveness and loving of enemies, we cannot be weaklings or cowards. Indeed, and Corrie ten Boom proved it, it takes great bravery to forgive. Jesus called for such bravery in his followers and he challenged them to go beyond the Hebrew law of retaliation – an eye for an eye – tooth for tooth – tit for tat. Jesus gives examples, 'turn the other cheek, 'go the second mile' 'hand over your coat as well as your shirt' and 'give to anyone who asks'. Jesus even went further with the challenge to holiness: 'Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you'.

For Jesus' contemporaries the enemy would have been the Roman occupying power as well as Jews and Gentiles who were openly hostile to him and his followers. To love and pray for people like that was unthinkable by human standards. However, we can't dismiss these challengers of Jesus by searching for loopholes or pass them off as fanciful. Believers in Jesus are called to go beyond the law and beyond the largesse of humanism – 'even the pagans do that'. In a few words Jesus calls for a perfection that reflects the holiness of God – a holiness that excludes revenge and retribution. That can only come from the Holy One. We, on our part, are to welcome this love and resolve through its strength living in us through prayer to take Jesus at his word.

The Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Nov. 1964) renewed the universal call to holiness. It said; 'It is quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk in life are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of love. By this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered in earthly society'. God created human kind in the divine image, the essence of all that is true, good, loving and holy and then called on every human believer to be true to that image in word and deed.

REFLECTION 2:

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Before he was killed in 1948, Gandhi wrote these words that proved all too soon to be prophetic: 'Have I the non-violence of the brave in me? My death will show that if someone killed me and I died with a prayer for the assassin on my lips and God's remembrance in my heart, only then would I be said to have the non-violence of the brave'. Not long after he wrote that, a Hindu who resented Gandhi's respect for Muslims, approached him as he was making his way to evening prayer and shot him three times in the chest. Before he died Gandhi raised his hand in a gesture of forgiveness and murmured 'Rama, rama, rama' - I forgive you, I love you, I bless you.

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For Jesus' contemporaries, the enemy would have been the Roman occupying power as well as those others, Jews and gentiles who were openly hostile to him and his followers. To love and pray for people like this is unthinkable by human standards. However, we can't dismiss these challenges of Jesus by searching for loopholes or pass them off as fanciful. Believers in Jesus are called beyond the law and beyond the largesse of humanism - 'even the pagans do that'. In a few words, Jesus calls for a perfection that reflects the holiness of God - a holiness that excludes revenge and retribution. That can only come from the Holy One. We, on our part, are to welcome this love and resolve, through its strength living in us, to take Jesus at his word.

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