

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 5:38-48

Jesus said to his disciples: 'You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer the other as well; if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles. Give to anyone who asks, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away.

'You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not? You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In this Sunday's Gospel — one of the passages that best illustrates Christian "revolution" — Jesus shows us the way of true justice through the law of love which is greater than the law of retaliation, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". This ancient law imposed the infliction on wrongdoers of a punishment equivalent to the damage they caused: death for those who killed, amputation for those who injured, and so on. Jesus does not ask his disciples to abide evil, but asks them to react; however, not with another evil action, but with good. This is the only way to break the chain of evil: one evil leads to another which leads to another evil.... This chain of evil is broken and things truly begin to change. Evil is, in fact, a "void", a void of good. It is not possible to fill a void, except with "fullness", that is,

good. Revenge never leads to conflict resolution. "You did this to me, I will do it back to you": this never resolves conflict, nor is it even Christian.

According to Jesus, the rejection of violence can also involve the sacrifice of a legitimate right. He gives a few examples of this: turn the other cheek, give up your coat or money, accept other sacrifices. But such sacrifice does not mean that the demands of justice should be ignored or contradicted. No, on the contrary, Christian love, which manifests itself in a special way in mercy, is an achievement superior to justice. What Jesus wants to teach us is the clear distinction that we must make between *justice* and *revenge*. Distinguishing between justice and revenge. Revenge is never just. We are permitted to ask for justice. It is our duty to exercise justice. We are, however, not permitted to avenge ourselves or, in any way foment revenge, as it is an expression of hatred and violence.

Jesus does not wish to propose a new system of civil law, but rather the commandment to love thy neighbour, which also includes loving enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you". And this is not easy. These words should not be seen as an approval of evil carried out by an enemy, but as an invitation to a loftier perspective, a magnanimous perspective, similar to that of the Heavenly Father, who, Jesus says, "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust". An enemy, in fact, is also a human being, created as such in God's image, despite the fact that in the present, that image may be tarnished by shameful behaviour.

When we speak of "enemies", we should not think about people who are different or far removed from us; let us also talk about ourselves, as we may come into conflict with our neighbour, at times with our relatives. How many hostilities exist within families — how many! Let us think about this. Enemies are also those who speak ill of us, who defame us and do us harm. It is not easy to digest this. We are called to

respond to each of them with good, which also has strategies inspired by love.

May the Virgin Mary help us follow Jesus on this demanding path, which truly exalts human dignity and lets us live as children of our Father who art in Heaven. May she help us exercise patience, dialogue, forgiveness, and to be artisans of communion, artisans of fraternity in our daily life, and above all in our families.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have you ever experienced intentionally loving your enemy instead of "hating" them? Did you feel your attitude towards them change? What was the effect on the conflict?
- Have you ever prayed for an enemy? What did you pray for them? Was there any fruit from doing this and, if so, what was the fruit?
- Jesus concludes this teaching by saying "you must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect". How does this command make you feel?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.