

23rd February 2020 (7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18; Psalm 102(103):1-4,8,10,12-13; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48.

Be perfect, be holy, just as your heavenly Father is perfect and holy!

In today's readings, the first reading, from the book of Leviticus, and the gospel invite us to place God the Father as the ideal we need to imitate; we are encouraged to be '*perfect*' and holy like the Father. In our human ears, this sounds a strange request to make. We often interpret the word '*perfect*' to mean human perfection; instead, scripture invites us to imitate the Father. This is nothing less than a repetition of the statement in the book of Genesis, where God says that we are created in his own image and likeness; for us to reach our fulfilment as human beings, we need to grow to look like the original, to the best of our ability!

Both the author of the book of Leviticus and Jesus himself clarify what this perfection means. Perfection and holiness are achieved when we love our neighbour, even our '*enemy*,' in the same way as God loves us. Jesus does not want us to be perfect in our achievements, or in the way we live; what is important for Jesus, his second commandment, immediately after he tells us of our duty to love our God, is to love those around us.

God, the only holy, perfect, merciful and just judge, does not distinguish between good and bad people, he loves everyone equally. God can do this because he puts the other person first, not himself. God does not limit himself to loving those who love him, and hates or punishes those who do not love him; he loves! As an allegory of God's love, Jesus points out that he lets the sun shine, and the rain to fall over everyone, both people who love him and people who do not. Similarly, through the incarnation and death of Jesus, salvation has been made equally available to all people.

The instruction of Jesus to love always and everyone, is a direct result of the new law of the beatitudes. In the beatitudes Jesus declared blessed those who empty themselves and become poor, hungry, thirsty and grieving, not because of what they have lost, but because of events that happen in the world around them. These are the ones who achieve the perfection and holiness Jesus speaks about in the gospel; they are the ones who experience the presence of God in their life.

For Jesus love means to go further than is required; to push one's boundaries. The old law established a limit for what one could claim for. The law dictating '*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*,' meant that you could not take revenge and kill the person who broke your tooth; you were only allowed to break one of his teeth, nothing else. Jesus tells his followers, not to seek even what is '*rightfully*' ours, and to offer no resistance. Rather than taking justice into our own hands, Jesus invites us to crave for justice, and to work hard to promote justice by the way we live, and then to leave judgement and retribution in God's hands. Jesus invites us not resist those who are evil and not to stop anyone who wants to hit us on the cheek, but rather to offer him the other cheek also and let God be the judge of his actions! If anyone wants to take the cloak that keeps you warm at night, let him take your tunic also. The fact that you will henceforth be standing naked in front of everyone, becomes a witness against the other person's injustice.

Jesus tells us that our call is to love always and at all times. Mother Teresa of Calcutta would later say: '*Love until it hurts!*' Jesus showed us what this really means when he knelt in front of his disciples and washed their feet; he even died on the cross to save us. This is the perfection and the holiness Jesus is asking from us, his disciples; to love everyone and always, just like the Father is ever loving and ever merciful to us, sinners!

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