

23. February 2020

**“Perfect as our Father in heaven”**

*Mt 5,38-48*

***“You have heard how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer no resistance to the wicked. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; if someone wishes to go to law with you to get your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone requires you to go one mile, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks you, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away. You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this 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 causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Do not even the gentiles do as much? You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

Hardly anywhere else will we find a challenge as high to man as the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. While the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” already placed a limit on vengeance, what Jesus now asks seems unattainable for us men. How can we interpret the first part of the text? Are these commands to be followed to the letter or are they to be understood rather in their spirit?

There is always the danger that, when we encounter something that seems impossible to us, we will relativize it by trying to accommodate it to our possibilities. Therefore the decisive question is: what did Jesus mean?

The whole paragraph leads into the word of the Lord: *“You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

So, in this passage we meet God's perfection. By contemplating this perfection, which is manifested to us in the Person of Jesus, we can understand what the application of His words consists of. Jesus has come to call sinners, that is, those who have made themselves His enemies. He does good to those who cannot repay Him. He heals the ear of the servant who had come to take him in Gethsemane,

because Peter had struck him with his sword (cf. Lk 22,50-51). He asks forgiveness for his executioners on the cross (cf. Lk 23,34).

In the perfection of Jesus we encounter another quality of love, which we are not capable of from within ourselves. It is the divine love that wants to have mercy on us human beings, that converts the enemies, that makes the persecutors into proclaimers, that is ready to forgive man all wrongdoings, if only he sincerely wants to!

We too can receive this love, for it has been poured into us through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5,5) to make us capable of working at ever greater perfection.

If we look at today's Gospel from this perspective, it is already more understandable to us. Perhaps not every word has to be interpreted to the letter. For instance, when it says that whoever forces you to walk one mile with him, walk two miles with him. We must also interpret other parts of the Bible in the Spirit, such as that passage where Jesus says that it is better to pluck out your eye before it causes you to sin (cf. Mt 5,29). It is clear that it is a matter of being ready to do violence to ourselves inwardly so that our gaze does not slip and lead us into temptation.

In the Sermon on the Mount we are presented with two alternatives: either we want to act in God's way and seek his Will in the various situations we have to face; or, on the contrary, we simply let ourselves be led by our natural reactions. Each situation calls for a response of love. Through prayer and the growing indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, we will be able to respond ever better. Of course, there may also be cases where the right response is to apply Jesus' words to the letter.

When the Lord asks us to love our enemies, He certainly means that we should not close our hearts to them, for we too were God's enemies through sin and He did not close His heart to us (cf. Rom 5:10). Rather, it was His ever-open heart that gave us and continues to give us the possibility of returning to Him. Let us recall the parable of the prodigal son, which reveals to us how God's heart is before that lost son, who is the image of all men who squander their divine inheritance (cf. Lk 15,11-32).

Thus, the Lord also exhorts us to pray for our enemies, and to leave them always an open door to reconciliation. At times, we are even asked to take the first step towards them, just as Jesus came to meet us by becoming man.

The key to understanding all these words of Jesus is the supernatural love with which God comes to meet us. Now, he calls us to grow in this supernatural love. If this love reigns in our life, we will understand more and more the words of Jesus and the Holy

Spirit will make us capable of fulfilling them, according to what is the Will of God in each concrete situation.