

9. September 2021

The way of God

Lk 6:27-38

But I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. To anyone who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek as well; to anyone who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from someone who takes it. Treat others as you would like people to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit can you expect? For even sinners do that much. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to get money back, what credit can you expect? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. Instead, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend without any hope of return. You will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap; because the standard you use will be the standard used for you.'

Today's Gospel introduces us, so to speak, to the „higher school“ of faith, and we can immediately notice that, if we want to at least come close to fulfilling these words of the Lord, only with God's grace will it be possible. This demand is beyond the reach of our human nature, which is also weakened and would be incapable of taking such steps on its own.

However, the Lord does not ask things of us without at the same time offering us the possibility of fulfilling them. That is why we must listen very carefully, just as the Lord invites us to do at the beginning of this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. If we pay close attention, we will see that He offers us the key to all these challenges, contained in these words of His: „Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.“

It is a matter of concretely applying those other words of the Lord, which are quite demanding: „You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect“ (Mt 5:48). Only through God's grace does it become possible to love one's enemies!

But this grace is not only limited to certain moments in which we can take such great steps of faith that we can overcome our human limitations. No, this grace can constantly act in us and shape our whole being. God's perfection and mercy are not sporadic attitudes; they are part of His Being. And so it must be with us... All that the Lord mentions here in the Sermon on the Mount are concrete expressions of God's love.

So the key to being able to practise this all-surpassing love is the love of God Himself, which makes us capable of acting like Him. We see, then, that we are called to "be like God"; but not in the sense of aspiring to His omnipotence, as was the case with Lucifer; rather, we are to love like God and imitate His way of acting and being.

This is the task of the Holy Spirit in us, who is the love between the Father and the Son poured into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5). If we live in a state of grace and sincerely follow the Lord, we allow the Spirit of God to transform us more and more. He, the Spirit of God, will teach us to love as God loves and make us capable of it.

The Holy Spirit will help us to see the enemy not only in terms of the evil he does to us, but to transcend this perspective, leading us to think of his eternal salvation. If he does evil to us without our having given him an objective motive, then he is in a terrible state and his eternal salvation may even be in danger. If we contemplate how the Lord lays down His life so that men may be saved; if we see Him on the Cross asking for those who torture Him, then the Holy Spirit will lead us also to pray for our enemies and to bless those who hate us.

At this point, we must beware of falling into the error that pretends to take these steps on an emotional level, as if the Lord would call us to have warm and kind feelings towards our enemies. That probably happens only rarely, if ever. They are rather acts of the spirit, for which we decide with our will and which make us capable of supernatural love. Such acts are fruits of the spiritual life, of listening to the Lord, whose words resonate in us thanks to the Holy Spirit. He reminds us of them and helps us to put them into practice in concrete situations.

All the marvellous acts presented to us in today's Gospel do not come "naturally" to us. In fact, we will usually have to overcome obstacles, when an enemy threatens us; when someone who hates us wants to harm us; when the one who insults us attacks our honour; when the one who hits or assaults us invades our private and personal sphere....

Such resistances cannot simply be ignored, in a religious act of the will. Indeed, we will continue to feel the effects when we are harmed, and it is not a matter of becoming stoic and insensitive, as if nothing can affect us.... However, if we struggle through prayer, we will be able to pay more attention to the workings of the Spirit than to our own feelings. Then we will be able to bear in the Lord the suffering caused by such hostility, and from union with God we will be able to give the response He wants from us. In this way we overcome the limitations of our human nature, for God's grace makes this possible.