

20. February 2022

## Love your enemies

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.'*

What Jesus expects of His disciples is nothing less than perfection!

It is an immensely lofty goal, but that is what our Lord is like: He wants perfection, but at the same time He has compassion for our weakness and our sin. It is important that we understand these two dimensions.

The Lord always wants us to respond to His love with all that we are and have, because then the plan He has for us can unfold. If we are already loving, we can love even more; if we are already living in the truth, we can immerse ourselves more deeply in it; if we are already becoming like the Lord, we can do so even more. Of course the Lord does not expect us to achieve all this from the beginning. He wants us to long to get there and to try earnestly. Then He Himself will help and sustain us in all situations, and give us the gifts of the Spirit to reach that high goal.

Moreover, the Lord will comfort us when we are weak, and when we feel that we are not achieving what we set out to do. He will encourage us to keep going! For the path of growth in love will not end as long as our earthly life lasts.

One of the great challenges on the road to perfection is love for one's enemies, which the Lord tells us about in today's Gospel. This demand becomes concrete the moment we really have someone who wants to harm us or even does so, perhaps without even noticing it.

The first reaction - which is certainly natural - is to turn away from such a person and not to want to have anything to do with him or her. This response is already much better than hatred and revenge!

But now let us imagine what would happen if God had this reaction: what if He turned away from us for every sin we commit and no longer wanted to have anything to do with us? For those who live in a trusting relationship with the Lord, it would be impossible to imagine that He could react like this. Perhaps sometimes we get the impression that He does, but faith assures us that the door of God's heart is always open to us, even when we refuse His offers. Moreover, God waits for us; his angels and saints intercede for us, and the Lord seeks ways to reach our hearts.

And this is our model of perfection! The Father never withdraws His love; *"for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good"* (Mt 5:45).

What does this mean for us? Love for our enemies can only be achieved by God's grace! It is not rooted in our human nature; it is a purely supernatural attitude. Therefore, we must ask God for it, and learn to deal with the contrary reactions and feelings that are aroused in us. Certainly the feelings will not be transformed to the point of emotionally loving the enemy.

Rather, it is a decision of the spirit and the will, which we can reach through prayer and by contemplating the attitude of Our Lord, who from the Cross prayed for his enemies (Lk 23:34). We can also keep in mind that the enemy who harms us is in danger of losing his eternal salvation. In thinking about this, we understand precisely one of the reasons why the Lord came into the world: He wants sinners to be converted so that they may be saved (cf. Lk 5:31-32). The love behind this desire is so great that He takes upon Himself all suffering. And in fulfilling this immeasurable mission, Jesus glorifies the Father.

Through love for our enemies, we can become very much like the Lord. It is the "top level" in the school of love; a high ladder on the way to perfection. If it should

happen that a real enemy appears in our life, for whatever reasons, let us ask the Father for the grace to be like Him; the Holy Spirit to strengthen us; and the Lord to grant us the same attitude as He had towards His enemies.

We can also turn with confidence to the Virgin Mary, for she is very concerned about the salvation of mankind and does not want anyone to be lost. Sometimes a person's hatred is not even a conscious decision to do evil; there may be many circumstances behind it that only God knows.