

19. February 2023

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.”

We will hardly find anywhere else such a challenge to people as the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Whereas the law of retaliation - "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" - already set a limit to vengeance, what Jesus now asks seems unattainable for us human beings. How should the first part of the text be interpreted? Are these precepts to be followed to the letter or are they to be understood in their spirit?

There is always a danger that, when we encounter something that seems impossible, we will relativise it by trying to accommodate it until it seems acceptable to us. So the decisive question is: what did Jesus mean?

The passage culminates with these words of the Lord: *"Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."* So, we encounter here the perfection of God. When we see this perfection, which is manifested to us in the Person of Jesus, we can understand what the application of these words of His is. Jesus has come to call sinners, i.e. those who had become His enemies. He does good to those who cannot repay him. He

heals the ear of the servant who had come to seize Him in Gethsemane, after Peter had struck him with his sword (cf. Lk 22:50-51). He forgives His executioners on the cross (cf. Lk 23:34).

In Jesus' perfection we encounter another level of love, which we could not attain on our own. It is divine love, which has compassion for mankind, which is capable of converting his enemies, of transforming the persecutor into an evangeliser, of forgiving all the crimes of mankind, if only man allows himself to be forgiven...

We too can receive this divine love, for it has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf. Rom 5:5), to enable us to work with ever greater perfection.

If we look at today's Gospel from this perspective, it becomes more understandable. Perhaps not every word has to be interpreted literally. For example, when it says that whoever forces you to walk one mile with him, go with him two miles. Other parts of the Bible should also be interpreted in the spirit, such as the passage in which Jesus says that it is better to pluck out one's eye than for it to cause one to sin (cf. Mt 5:29). Clearly, it is a question of our willingness 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 carried away by our natural reactions. Every situation calls for a loving response. Through prayer and the growing indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us, we will be able to respond better and better.

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). On the contrary, it was His ever-open Heart that gave us and continues to give us the possibility to return to Him. Let us recall the parable of the prodigal son, which shows us God's attitude towards that lost son, who represents 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 always leave an open door for reconciliation.

The key to understanding all these words of Jesus is the immense love with which God comes to meet us. He now calls us to grow in this supernatural love. If it reigns in our lives, we will understand Jesus' words better and better, and the Holy Spirit will enable us to fulfil them, according to what is God's will in each concrete situation.