

17. June 2024

If someone harms you...

Mt 5:38-42

'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.'

With these words, the Lord opens up a completely new horizon, which goes far beyond the “rights relationship” that usually prevails between people. Perhaps we can compare it to the relationship between justice and mercy. The latter surpasses justice (cf. Jas 2:13), and introduces us in a special way into the mystery of God's love.

The same is true in today's text. The Lord changes the image of the enemy before our eyes: he is no longer the one to whom I repay what he has done to me, in order to re-establish justice. The Gospel shows us another way, in which, if possible, it is even a matter of “winning” the enemy for God. This requires a different quality of love, which we cannot achieve on our own.

Indeed, it is God Himself who acts in this way, for He loved us while we were still His enemies because of sin (cf. Rom 5:8-10). God's love did not stop at man's rejection. He knew that He was sending His Son into a world that often viewed Him with hostility, and He was aware that they would mistreat and crucify Him.

But what alternative was left to His love? Could He definitively reject men, leaving them to their own fate and thus abandoning them to damnation, together with the demons? No! God would not be capable of that! That is why He sent His only Son to take away the sin of the world (cf. Jn 1:29).

Thus every man, no matter how much he has gone astray, is offered forgiveness in Christ. It could be said that in the Cross the enmity was overcome (cf. Eph 2:14-16):

the murderer can become a brother, once he accepts God's forgiveness and changes his life, thanks to the power that comes from Him.

Now Jesus invites us to enter into this dimension of love. We must not stand on our rights. Of course we will continue to call sin by its name and to reject injustice, because the Lord did not stop doing that either (cf. Jn 18:23). It is also important to keep acknowledging it: if someone has really wronged us, we cannot simply act as if it was not wrong. Otherwise, mercy becomes sweet and deformed, and one no longer takes injustice seriously.

But love is capable of taking the decisive step: it offers reconciliation, it does not close the wounded heart, but opens it, just as Jesus did in front of us: *"Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing"* (Lk 23:34) - He said on the Cross in front of His executioners.

This is the context in which today's Gospel speaks to us, inviting us to put aside the perspective of right for the sake of a greater love.

To live up to these high standards, as well as to apply the Beatitudes, we need God's grace. If we pretend to fulfil these teachings of Jesus simply by our human will, we will soon run up against our limitations and end up disappointed, no longer willing to strive for what is more perfect.

Today's Gospel, then, is a deeper discovery of God's love, which can enable us to act like the Lord. However, this is not to be confused with an attitude that avoids any conflict with another person and always gives in, in order to avoid confrontation. Instead, it is a very conscious attitude, which, in the face of the hostility we encounter, is able to leave natural reactions behind and concretely asks God to be able to act like Him.

With God's grace, the eternal salvation of the other person must be the primary consideration. Even if a direct encounter with our enemy is not possible, we can always pray for him and for the salvation of his soul: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly"* (Lk 6:27b-28).

The exhortation to love our enemies and to deal differently with hostility is one of the greatest challenges on the path of following the Lord, for it demands that we go far beyond our natural reactions. In the face of this exhortation, inner resistance often arises, even if in the spirit we consent to such a dimension and admire it in those who are able to put it into practice.

For the concrete application, it is necessary to work on our own heart and sometimes even on our will. If the Lord exhorts, He also gives the grace to correspond to His standards. Of this we can be sure, and ask Him insistently to enable us to love our enemies.