

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 19 February 2023

Scriptures: Lev.19:1-2,17-18; 1Cor. 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

Homily: Fr. Ken

“Love your enemies”. That is certainly one of the most well known stories in the Gospels. Of course, there is more to it than that.

Jesus, by this time, was well aware of the way the Jews demonized their enemies, such as the Samaritans. He knew that in the Jewish scriptures there were passages that spoke about hatred of enemies. But he also knew there was another tradition which forbids such hatred.

In the first reading, the Book of Leviticus insists that we are not to seek vengeance or bear grudges in our heart. When Jesus teaches the values of the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount, he builds on that very tradition. In the startling language of turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, he shakes us out of the complacency of our set ideas. He is trying to make us think in a new way and allow God’s kingdom to break into our lives. So he tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

But why should we do something that seems so contrary to the way of the world? Because that is what God does. The God of creation shows grace to all God’s creatures, whether they are sinners or saints; God causes the sun to shine on honest and dishonest people alike. Jesus wants us to be holy as God is holy. And so we are to love our enemy; but this is not so much about feelings as about giving effective help, just as the Good Samaritan did. This is how Jesus put his words into action, by reaching out to sinners and those who were despised, to both rich and poor, and in the end forgiving those who were killing him.

Loving enemies is not easy and it ended with him nailed to a cross. But Jesus' resurrection shows us that such values defeat death and lead to eternal life.

At the heart of our faith is the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Yet, we may be tempted to ignore it, because it seems so radical, so difficult.

But our calling as Christians is to imitate Jesus and his teaching, just as Christians have done for centuries, and just as the martyrs have done who forgave their enemies as they themselves perished.

In a world that is so full of hatred and vengeance, at the individual and national and international levels, we can ask ourselves: Can we follow the teachings of the Gospel? Or, do we go on bearing those grudges that we rather enjoy nursing and hating the enemies that give us our identity? Does the Church give a different example, or is it like any other group that loves its friends and reciprocates hospitality only with its own kind?

Jesus tells us to be perfect just as our heavenly Creator is perfect. What does this mean for us today? It means that we can respond to Jesus with an undivided heart and a faithful devotion. When we try to turn the other cheek and love our enemies, we bear witness to the graciousness of a heavenly God who wants us to embody in our very own daily lives the amazing love of Jesus Christ.

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