

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

There is an old saying that states, "Like mother, like daughter; like father, like son". What is behind this saying is the truth that, most of the time, the morality of children is linked to some extent to the behavior of parents. If that is true on a human level, especially with regard to the good character children can inherit from the parents, it is also true on a spiritual level. That is why the readings of this Sunday draw our attention to the important fact that God is the foundation of Christian ethics. The way he treats us in his bounty and generosity should be inspirational for our own behavior in society and in dealing with one another.

In the first reading of the book of Leviticus, Moses invites the people of Israel to be holy because God himself is holy. What he meant by that is that they should have the feeling and the heart of God as he is merciful and forbearing toward his children. For that reason, they have to remove from their midst hatred, revenge and grudges. They have to love their neighbors as themselves. Although, they have to correct their fellow citizens, they should not sin by lack of charity.

This teaching on morality is reinforced by Jesus in today's Gospel as he lays down the principles of Christian ethics and the conduct that should distinguish Christians from non-Christians.

From the outset, Jesus opposes the new principles he gives to the old law known as the law of tit for tat or the law of retaliation. The law of retaliation appeared for the first time in the Code of Hammurabi, the king of Babylon. According to that law, if a person has injured another, he/she should be given an equivalent of the pain he/she inflicted on the other.

In that sense, this law was considered an attempt in the application of distributive justice and the beginning of mercy in so far as it tried to limit the blindness that comes with vengeance. For Jesus, however, whatever might be the aim of this law and its benefice for the life of people in society, retaliation, even controlled, has no right in Christian life. Rather, what fits the Christian ethics is the spirit of non-resentment and non-retaliation.

In order to show the relevance of Christian ethics and how the people of God should behave, Jesus gives a couple of examples taken from the life of Israel. The first example refers to non-resistance when facing insult, humiliation and despise. In fact, when two opponents are face to face and one would like to smite the other on the right cheek, the only way to do so is to strike him with the back of the hand.

According to the Jewish tradition, to hit someone with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the flat of the hand. If that is the case, then, the point of Jesus is that even if someone should insult us in a deadly way, we should never retaliate or resent.

The second example is about the non-claim before the legal rights. In fact, a Jew had two types of garments: the tunic and the cloak. The tunic was the main dress and anyone could have many. The cloak was a robe that was worn by day and used as a blanket at night. Of such garment, a Jew would have just one.

According to the Jewish law, in fact, a tunic could be taken as a pledge and not the cloak. If that is the case, then, by proposing that both might be taken away, Jesus would like to tell us that we should not dispute about our rights. Instead of our legal rights and privileges, we have to think of our duties and responsibilities.

The third example Jesus refers to is about liberality toward a compelling master or the needy. It was common at that time that the occupying power pressured the Jewish people at anytime to provide the services it needed for its benefice. Jesus says that even in such a compelling case, as Christians, we should never serve with bitterness, but always gladly, with the only concern to help.

The last example Jesus gives is about the love of our enemies. In order to understand the relevance of Jesus' proposal, we need to make the distinction between filial love that exists between children and their parents and the marital love which exists between husband and wife. The feeling that drives the filial love is affection. It is deeply rooted in the human heart so that no one can help loving his/her our children. The emotion that drives the marital love is passion. It is strongly rooted in the human heart that no one can help falling in love.

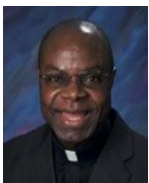
When Jesus is asking us to love our enemies, he is not expecting us to do it as we love the members of our family or our spouse. Frankly, that is just impossible. Filial and marital love are an act of the heart while the love of enemies is an act of the will. We need a little bit of goodwill in order for it to happen. We have to bring in not only our heart, but also our head, so that it might be conquered over our natural instinct of resentment toward our enemies.

All that brings us to this question: Why does Jesus ask us to love our enemies? He does so because such a love makes us resemble God. God is benevolent with everybody; he makes his sun rise on the good and the bad alike and his rain fall on the just and the unjust. Following our Father, it is our duty to love not only our enemies, but also to pray for our persecutors.

Prayer, when it is done in the spirit of Jesus, is powerful. That is why it seems to me impossible to pray for someone and still hate him/her. Any serious prayer makes a difference in our life and in our relationship with others. It is only in that way that we can be like God. Otherwise, there is no difference between us and the pagans.

Let us ask Jesus to help us be really the temple of his presence so that we come to embrace his principle of love of enemies. Let us ask him for the grace of praying in the spirit of the kingdom. God bless you!

Leviticus 19, 1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3, 16-23; Matthew 5, 38-48



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