

## 7th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

There is a section in Matthew's Gospel where he portrays Jesus as again and again being misunderstood, attacked and rejected. At the end of that section Matthew leaves us in no doubt about Jesus' response. He continues to reach out to those who oppose him, and through his own experience of rejection he learned a profound compassion for others in similar situations. He says: 'Come to me all you who are weary and over-burdened, and I will give you rest. Learn from me for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls'(Matthew 11:28-29).

Today's Gospel looks at this virtue of meekness. A person is said to be meek when he or she is at once strong and gentle. Sometimes another person's aggression is too hurtful and the best we can do is to admit our inability to cope. We distance ourselves from the aggression. We know we are being weak but there doesn't seem to be any other way. At other times we put up a fight and give as well as we get. On such occasions we may even feel strong and assertive, but it is a risky strategy and can cause a lot of hurt to the other person as well as to ourselves. Jesus shows us another way to respond where we neither run away in weakness nor treat our attacker with the same kind of nastiness with which he or she is treating us. Jesus shows us how to be strong by standing our ground and not letting evil have its way unchallenged, while at the same time responding gently and with love. This is called meekness and we can learn it from him who is 'meek and humble of heart'.

Paul learned this lesson from Jesus. In his first letter written to the community at Thessalonica, he advises the newly converted Christians: 'See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to everyone'(1Thessalonians 5:15). He gives similar advice to the Christians in Rome: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'(Romans 12:21). In today's Gospel, Jesus illustrates this lesson in a number of ways. When we are struck on one cheek we are to offer the other. This can easily be misunderstood as though Jesus were telling us to passively put up with being abused. That is certainly not the point he is making. We are to imagine a disciple offering his or her right cheek to someone as a greeting of welcome and peace. When the offering is rejected, the disciple is to continue to reach out to the other person, even offering the left cheek when that is appropriate. Just because someone rejects our offer of love, that is not a good reason for us to stop reaching out. When as disciples we are insulted or treated badly, we are to remember how Jesus was treated and respond as Jesus did. As Peter tells us: 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly'(1Peter 2:23).

Jesus goes on to describe a situation in which someone forcibly steals our coat. He tells us to give our cloak as well. There are times when it is appropriate to defend our rights, but Jesus is warning us against presuming that this is always the case. Sometimes it is simpler to be generous rather than live our life defending ourselves only to end up as grasping as those who are treating us badly. Likewise in the third illustration. What another person does in forcing us to walk one mile is his or her affair. We do not have to let them control also our response and we may choose to act generously towards them in spite of the way they have behaved towards us.

The basic point of all this is that, like Jesus himself, we are to learn to love as God loves. Our

unfaithfulness does not change God's faithfulness (2Timothy 2:13). God does not stop loving when we stop loving. As Jesus says, God pours rain and sunshine down upon us whether we behave well or badly. If we want to know the kind of perfection on which we are to set our sights and towards which we are to direct our life, it should be the kind of perfection which we see in God. After all God is our Father, our Mother, the source of our life and the one who continues to nurture us with his love, and we are made in God's image.

The perfection of God is described in the Responsorial Psalm as one of love and compassion. The psalmist reminds us of the fact that our lives are surrounded by God's love and compassion (Psalm 103:4). We are reminded never to forget the way God has continued to love us, especially by continuing to forgive us our sins. The prophets love to dwell on this truth: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender'(Hosea 11:8). 'Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord'(Jeremiah 31:20).

So we, like Jesus, are to love even those who oppose us and treat us unjustly. The word Jesus uses for 'love' does not require of us that we feel affection for our enemies. That may not be possible, though feelings of compassion can sometimes lead to a certain affection. What he asks is that we recognise the value of other people and behave well towards them, even though they are behaving badly towards us. They are made in the image of God, and God continues to reach out to them to strengthen them to behave in more appropriate ways. Could we be like God and do the same? Jesus tells us what he means by love: it means to pray for them (5:44), to do good to them (5:55) and to greet them in peace (5:47; compare 5:9), however badly they might treat us. The kind of love of which Jesus is speaking here concerns not feeling but decision: faithful commitment to the good of another. This love is from Christ; it is a participation in his loving. In the words of Paul: 'Christ lives in me ... and I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and who gave himself for me'(Galatians 2:20).

If we love Jesus, we will do what he commands us (John 15:15), and his command is that we love one another as he loves us (John 15:12, see John 13:34-35). Jesus requires of his disciples that we do good to everyone. The reason for this universal command takes us to the heart of the good news. God is not the God of one people only. God is the God of the 'tax collectors'(5:46); the God of the 'Gentiles'(5:47). God is the 'Father' of all: 'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made'(Psalm 145:9; compare Wisdom 15:1).

According to Jesus, God does not cease doing good, even if people are evil or unrighteous. We are to learn to respond to evil in the same way. This lesson is central to being a Christian. We find Paul saying the same thing: 'Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'(Ephesians 5:1-2). Also John: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God ... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us'(1John 4:7-12). Also Peter: 'Be like obedient children ... as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct ... love one another deeply from the heart'(1Peter 1:14,15,25).

God's holiness radiates out to every land and every people. So must it be with us if we are to be

faithful disciples of Jesus. Jesus gave a perfect response to God's perfect love. The same kind of perfection is required of those who follow Jesus (19:21): a perfection that calls us ever forward in a process of purification that will find its culmination in the beatific vision (5:8). Christians are called to share in the creative work of God in this world, till all is as God intends it to be.

Today we might examine our relationships. We may have to learn to stop submitting to aggressive behaviour, from our partner, from our children, or from others in our life. We may have to learn to stop biting back, using our tongue to give vent to our frustration and to get even with those who hurt us. Let us watch Jesus and learn from him the strong but gentle virtue of meekness. It may not lead to reconciliation. Jesus' enemies kept resisting his love. But even if it fails to bring about a change of behaviour in others, it does enable us to stand our ground without retaliating in destructive, dysfunctional ways. It is the way to peace.