

THAT WAS SAID TO THOSE OF OLD, BUT I SAY TO YOU – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 5.17-37

At that time Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall

perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

The announcement of the beatitudes by Jesus, as a new covenant between God and His people, was not welcomed well by the people and nor by the disciples. Why? They were expecting the coming of the kingdom as a sign of great splendor and manifestation of power, Israel would have taken possession of the riches of the pagan nations that they would have dominated.

And so the invitation of Jesus with the beatitudes, is not that of enriching oneself but actually that of sharing and of putting oneself at the service of others, must not have been accepted. Here is why Jesus says 'no'. It is Matthew, chapter 5,17 “*“Do not think that I have come to...”*” and uses the verb ‘abolish’ that was used for laws but ‘destroy, demolish’, that is used for a building, “*«...the Law or the Prophets; »*” it indicates the way in which we call the Old Testament.

Therefore Jesus says: “That construction of the kingdom, the laws and the prophets, I have not come to destroy it, but “*«...to fulfill them. »*”, not as you may think, but as I say, that is not through the accumulating richness, but through the practice of sharing, not through dominating others, but through service. It is, above all, not for an exclusive people, but open to all humanity.

And Jesus continues: “*«For truly, »*” assures Jesus, “*«...until heaven and earth pass away.. »*” a way of saying the whole cosmos, “neither a minimum element of the Hebrew alphabet”, an iota “*«...will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.»*” Therefore Jesus guarantees the full realization of the project of the kingdom.

When there is a community that welcomes the beatitudes the kingdom becomes reality and after one must only be happy and expand it. Then Jesus warns: “*«..whoever relaxes»*” literally ‘ignores, fails to carry out’ “*«..one of the least of these commandments..»*”, it does not refer to the laws of Moses that Jesus has not nominated, but refers to the beatitudes, that, beside the greatness, the importance, the severity of the commandments, Jesus defines as minimum.

And so, he who ignores the beatitudes, will be considered minimum, or the contrary of great, in the kingdom of heaven, there where the great are those that observe them. This expression of minimum or great does not mean the hierarchy in the kingdom of God, but indicates the belonging or exclusion. Therefore whoever ignores these beatitudes will be excluded from the kingdom, whoever practices them will be admitted.

Remember that the 'kingdom of heaven' is a way of saying the 'kingdom of God' used by Matthew, therefore it is not the kingdom of heaven as in the hereafter, but the kingdom of God, the new society that Jesus has come to start, where God governs mankind not issuing laws that must be observed, but communicating to them his Spirit.

And just for this Jesus warns his disciples saying: "*«..unless your righteousness.. »*", it implies faith to the covenant, "*«..exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.. »*", that is a formal faith, a faith bound to the letter, but not to the Spirit "*«..you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. »*". Therefore if there is not a different fidelity, to that literal and formal one of scribes and Pharisees, there is no belonging to the kingdom.

And then Jesus begins to destroy - here is the yes - the past traditions to change it for something new, immeasurably more beautiful. "*«You have heard that it was said to those of old,.. »*", this expression of Jesus is challenging. He should have said "You have waited for that which was said to our fathers", and instead Jesus speaks of the old, therefore something negative.

"*«You shall not murder; »*" so Jesus says "*«But I say to you..»*" and here he pronounces six times this expression with which he changes the new in His covenant to the old, to that of the ancient times, "*«... everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; »*" and who insults will be subject to the Sanhedrin, the highest order of judgment, and who actually He says "fool", which means 'renegade', "*«..will be liable to the hell of fire»*".

What does Jesus want to say? When you are angry with another and you do not calm that anger straight away, and this anger turns to insult and the insult even arrives at the exclusion of the other from your life - this is the meaning of 'crazy' - well then, you are destined to burn in Geena, the 'hellish' rubbish heap of Jerusalem. So Jesus says to His disciples: "Who excludes someone from his own life, excludes himself from the life of God".

And here is why it is important, Jesus says, that before having contact with God, it is necessary to be on good terms with your brother. Here Jesus gives an example: "*«So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember... »*", not that you have something against your brother, but that he has something against you, go and make peace. Therefore the reconciliation and the serenity in the community is so important that it proceeds the duties towards God.

And for this Jesus says to have an attitude of kindness towards the other. And then continues "*«You have heard that it was said,.... »*" and here the delicate subject of adultery is discussed, "*«You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman...»*", and uses the word to indicate a married woman, therefore the wife of someone, "*«...with lustful intent...»*". Here it does not mean the normal sexual desire of a man towards a woman, that is part of the system of creation, but to consider the woman of another as an object of possession.

Well then, for Jesus, "*«...has already committed adultery with her in his heart. »*", in his own conscience. And Jesus gives indications, remedies. "*«If your right eye..»*" He speaks of looking and the eye indicates desire, "*«..causes you to sin»*", that is to trip-up "*«.. tear it out and throw it away»*" that is

that if there is some, principle in your life, some conduct – then Jesus gives an example of a hand that indicates activity,- well then, even if it is painful, uproot this conduct from your life, because otherwise it will take you to destruction.

In fact Jesus will say, “*«For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell »*”. Therefore if in your life there is some conduct, some behavior, that you know will tempt you for the fullness of your existence, eliminate it, even if it is painful. Rather than ruin your whole existence. And Jesus then speaks also of repudiation. Here He is not speaking of divorce, divorce did not yet exist, but of repudiation, one sided actions of the man towards his wife.

And she could be repudiated for almost anything. Well then Jesus does not agree. He says: “*«..that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of...»*”, and Matthew uses here the Greek word ‘porneia’, which has a great number of meanings, but to not fall into the case history of Jesus’ words. Here it is translated with “*«.....sexual immorality. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery»*”

And finally Jesus relates to the report that should exist inside of the community, a report of sincerity and great openness, and therefore it relates to the practice of loyalty that Jesus excludes absolutely inside of His community. Jesus will say: “*«Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; »*”.

Therefore the mouth must express that which the heart contains, that which the mind contains, without any duplicity or falseness because, Jesus adverts, “*«.....anything more than this comes from evil»*”, evil, the devil, it is that which, according to the Bible and Jesus, had introduced falsehood into the world, and it is the image of power. More than in speaking and the use and consummation of the structure of power to dominate the others, therefore Jesus asks, in relations with our brothers, in relation inside the community, an openness of language, not a diplomatic language, not a conventional language, but clear and direct.