

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 5, 38-48 38

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Jesus proposes a new relationship with God, that can no longer be contained in the old alliance. For this, in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 5, after the proclamation of the beatitudes, Jesus begins to take his distance from certain statements contained in the old alliance, saying “*You have heard that it was said,..*” And this is the fourth time that Jesus repeats these words, saying: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’* This law, that is known as the retaliation law which undoubtedly is a horrible revenge, in reality, at that time, was progress., because revenge was unlimited and ruthless, as told in the book of Genesis, in the episode of Lamech, who boasted: “*...I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.*” (Genesis 4, 23) The phrase that Jesus uses comes from the book of Deuteronomy, at the end of chapter 19, 21 where it is written: “*Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*”

So, it is a law where compassion does not exist, where the guilty person must pay for what he has done. Well, Jesus dissociates all this: “*But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*” Keep in mind that the only time that Jesus received a slap, he was careful not to turn the other cheek. So what does Jesus’ statement mean? It is not an invitation to be a simpleton , but to be good all the way: mellowing the other's anger and aggression, with your goodness, it disarms the other person and you do not pass as foolish.

“*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*” It is an overpowering person, so leave him something that he cannot take, a cloak which serves also as a blanket in the night, he will wrap himself up with the tunic and cloak, and you will be free. Therefore Jesus asks for the fullness of freedom, all based on disarming the aggression of the other person.

“*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*” Jesus refers to the laws of the occupation forces, which imposed forced exercises, forced the people to perform, as it will be for the Cyrene forced to carry the cross, and “*go with him two miles*” and disarm the other's aggression with your love because if you reply with aggression, it grows and you do not know where it will end .

Then Jesus gives very clear indications for the Christian community: “*Give to the one who begs from you,*” Giving is not to lose, but to gain, because it is known that when one gives, the Father will then give more abundantly, “*... and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*” so Jesus asks to have this attention for the needy without calculating.

“*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’* to the commandment to love your neighbour, it is added to the hate your enemy. We can find this in the Psalms,

for example there is in Psalm 139, 21 where it says *"Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred;.."* so to love your neighbour was untied with to hate your enemy.

With Jesus, in the new relationship with the Father and with others, all this comes to an end: *"But I say to you, Love your enemies.."* it is a generous love, a love that becomes a gift that Jesus asks, and love becomes prayer: *"..and pray for those who persecute you,.."* that are these enemies. Why? *".. so that you may be sons of your Father ..."* Son, in the culture of that time, did not only mean one born of someone, but also he who was alike in behaviour, therefore like the Father *"..who is in heaven."* Here Jesus, as well as giving indication on the behaviour of his disciples, he reveals to us who God is, saying: *"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."*

The prophet Amos did not agree, he presented a God that refused rain over the unjust. No, Jesus' God is not a God that rewards the good and punishes the wicked, but he is a God of love, a God that shows his love towards everyone, regardless of their behaviour and as Jesus has said, a God that lets the sun shine not only on the wicked and on the good, on all those that have need and not only those that merit it. Jesus passes by the theory, the doctrine of merit to that of the gift: God does not love the creatures for their merits, but for their needs.

And Jesus comments: *"For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"* The tax collectors were those alleged to be violators of all the commandments, the ones furthest from God. *"And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"* therefore Jesus names the gentiles and the publicans, the categories that were furthest from God. They also are able to greet those who greet them and to love those who love them, what is remarkable in doing this? Jesus concludes *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* Jesus does not ask to be perfect like God, which could confuse the person for the immensity of God, no, but Jesus talks of being perfect in the sense of being complete, as full as the Father. And what is the perfection of the Father? It is what we have seen: that of a love that will appeal to all, a love that does not look at the merits of the people, but look at their needs: this is "perfection" possible to every believer.