

**LOVE YOUR ENEMIES – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Mt 5.38-48**

*At that time Jesus said to his disciples, "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 neighbor 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.*

It may seem discouraging the invitation that Jesus makes and that we read in Matthew's Gospel: "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*", because we think straight away at the perfection of God, with all that we can imagine, of the power of greatness of God.

Let's see what the evangelist means with this invitation to perfection. The Gospel that we comment on is Matthew chapter 5,38. Jesus continues to take a distance from the laws of Moses to present an alternative for society and a new way to relate with the Lord. And Jesus says: "*«You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'»*"

This law of Moses really was a great step forward in those that regarded the handling of the vendetta that at first was unlimited. The boasting of Lamech is famous in the Bible, it is found in the Book of Genesis, chapter 4, 24, where Lamech complains and says: "*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.*"

Therefore the vendetta was unlimited. Moses in fact tried to put a limit, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Well then, Jesus takes his distance from this and asks to take a step further. “*« But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. »*”. This invitation of Jesus does not mean that to be passive people and accept every arrogance. A Christian is not this, on the contrary. But it means to break the circle of violence, propose good initiatives, of love and peace, that defuse this hate and this violence that falls on you.

For this, when Jesus says “*« ... if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. »*” it does not mean to be stupid. Jesus does not think that we are stupid, simple, but good right to the end. In fact the only time that Jesus receives a slap is in John’s Gospel, indeed He does not present the other cheek, but had said: “*If I went wrong show me where I went wrong, if I have not been wrong why this violence?*”

Therefore Jesus invites not to oppose the violence with violence, otherwise this grows and then after it swells and becomes never ending violence that generates other violence. For this Jesus does not ask – repeat - to be stupid, but to be good, defuse the violence with good proposals even better.

The believer is he who, in front of violence from another, makes him understand: “*Look your capacity to wish to do violence to me will never be as great as my wish to do good to you*”. This is the invitation of Jesus. Then Jesus goes on to touch one of the pillars of the Hebrew spirituality, “*«You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor..’»*”, the love of your neighbor was a limited love, because it arrived up to the concept of neighbor, which was very relative.

The concept nearest was he who was part of my family clan, a little larger to those in my tribe, still larger the Israeli nation, but no further. Therefore it was a love that had limits. “*«'...and hate your enemy.'»*” Hate the enemy was normal in that society, but furthermore it was justified by the hate that God had for the sinners. Psalm 139,21-22 is a typical song 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; I count them my enemies.*”

One never hates so much as when one hates in the name of God, because one feels justified in this hate. Well then Jesus takes His distance from all this. “*«But I say to you, Love your enemies »*”. Therefore Jesus proposes a love at a higher level that knows no limits of love towards the neighbour, but surpasses it. This is the exclusive novelty of Jesus, it is a love that embraces also the enemy.

And ‘to love’ Jesus has not chosen the Greek verb ‘fileo’ from which philosophy, philanthropy, a love of good will that receives something in exchange, but the verb ‘agapao’, from which we all know, means a love that is independent of the quality of he who receives it, independent from the response from another. Therefore of a love that does not look at the merits of the person loved, a love that generates itself because of the need of the other, not for the response that one could have.

“*«...pray for those who persecute you, »*”, Therefore it is clear that for the enemy is meant as he who persecutes the Christian community. Well then, Jesus asks to go further, this love does not become real unless it is not transformed in love for those that persecute it. If there is this something happens that

transforms into love for those that persecute it. If there is this, something happens that transforms the existence of the believer, “*«...so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.»*”

To be a son in that culture meant he that was like the father in behavior. So, if who loves the enemy and prays for the enemy is like the Father, here is seen the quality of God's love, a love that arrives to all, even to those that are considered enemies.

And then Jesus gives an illustration of what this love means, “*«For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good..»*”, it is an offer of life that is open to all. The God of Jesus is not good, he is exclusively good, he does not look at the merit of the people, but looks at their needs. He is not the God that rewards the just and punishes the evil, but to all, the just and evil, he offers His love.

Then Jesus gives another example, “*«...sends rain on the just and on the unjust»*”. Therefore these examples, that are understandable to all, the sun and the rain, want to say that the love of God is a love from which no one need feel excluded. Jesus does not discriminate between the worthy or not, between the pure and impure, but His love is for all.

And then Jesus says: “*For if you love those who love you*”, and takes the category thought to be the furthest from God, the tax collectors, those that were impure and the pagans, those that had other divinities. “*..if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*”

And here is Jesus' final invitation: “*«You therefore must be perfect,... »*”, which means to be full, complete, “*«..as your heavenly Father is perfect»*”. Here after all this, now we understand well what is the meaning of this invitation to perfection. It means to be good all through. And this is not a virtue , an extraordinary heroism possible only for a few, but to be good all through is in the capacity and the possibility of everybody.

When one realizes that the believers' life is wound up with that of God and it becomes one thing; mankind permits to God to be their Father and experiment his intimate presence, profound, in every situation of their own existence and of their own life.