

OT VII [A] (Feb 19) Homily on Mt 5:38-48 (L-17)

Introduction: Today's readings explain why Christians are expected to be holy and how we are meant to become holy people. The first and second readings give us reasons why we should be holy and the Gospel describes four methods of becoming holy people prescribed for us by Jesus.

Scripture lessons: The first reading, taken from the book of Leviticus, teaches us that we should be holy because it is the command given to us by God through Moses: "Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." It also shows us the way to share in God's holiness: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 103) challenges us to be holy as our God is holy by becoming kind and merciful and forgiving.

In the second reading, St. Paul gives us an additional reason to be holy. We are to keep our bodies and souls holy because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Life messages from the gospel: In the Gospel passages taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us four methods of becoming holy as God is holy. 1) The first method is to abstain from all forms of retaliation. Jesus discards even the milder form of retaliation developed by Hammurabi in ancient Babylon and passed on to Israel through Moses. The policy was one of limited, proportional retaliation (Lex Talionis, "tit-for-tat"): "an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth," rather than allowing unlimited vengeance. In place of this limited, proportional retaliation, Jesus gives his new law of love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and no retaliation. For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life, even though graceful acceptance of an offense requires great strength and discipline of character and strengthening by God's grace. 2) The second method of becoming holy as God is holy is to take the offense gracefully and love the offender. Jesus illustrates this in three images: "turning the other cheek, freely giving the tunic and adding the cloak to it, and walking the extra mile." Jesus tells us that what makes Christians different is the grace with which they treat others, offering them loving kindness and mercy, even if they don't deserve this treatment. We are commanded to love our enemies as Jesus loves us, with agápe love, not because our enemies deserve our love, but because Jesus loves them so much that he died for them as he did for us. 3) The third method of sharing in God's holiness is by unconditionally and whole-heartedly forgiving the offender without planning revenge in any form. This means not only loving one's neighbours, but also forgiving those enemies who hurt us and wilfully cause us suffering, hardship and unhappiness. 4) The fourth method of becoming holy as God is holy is to seal our determination to forgive our enemies by sincerely praying for their spiritual and physical welfare and for the grace needed for their

conversion and renewal of life. Thus today's Scripture readings challenge us to become holy as our God is holy by loving, forgiving and blessing others as our Holy God does.

OT VII [A] (Feb 19) Lv 19:1-2, 17-18; I Cor 3:16-23; Mt 5:38-48

Anecdotes: 1) "If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb": On the Veterans Day of November 1996, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, now 33, came to the black granite Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a wife and mother, to tell several thousand spectators that she forgives those who bombed her village and has put the past behind her. Kim Phu placed a wreath at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and delivered a short speech. When Kim Phu was only 9 years old, her picture was taken by an Associated Press photographer and it stirred the conscience of the world. Moments after the picture was taken, Kim Phuc lost consciousness and was taken to a hospital by the photographer, Nick Ut, who later won a Pulitzer Prize for the photo. Her village had just been hit by a United States napalm attack. Her two brothers were killed instantly. Kim Phu's clothes were burned off her. In the photograph, this little girl was running, naked, in pain and terror. In front of the wall inscribed with the names of more than 58,000 U.S. war dead, Kim Phuc said that she was focused on the future. Speaking to a hushed crowd in Washington, she made the following statement: "I have suffered a lot from my physical and emotional pain. Sometimes I thought I could not live, but God saved my life and gave me Faith and Hope. If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, I would tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do things for the present and for the future to promote peace." No retaliation! Just tough, wise love. (http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-11-12/news/9611120185_1_phan-thi-kim-phuc-vietnam-veterans-memorial-fund-war-victim). That's the spirit of Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount given in today's Gospel. It's the greatest power on earth. In the face of it, the devil trembles.

2) "The goal is reconciliation and redemption." Martin Luther King, Jr. would take this principle from the Sermon on the Mount and use it to revolutionize America. King used to say, "No man can pull me down so low as to make me hate him." The real goal, said King, was not to defeat the white man, but to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and to challenge his false sense of superiority. "The goal is reconciliation, redemption, the creation of the beloved community." The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount which Martin Luther King paraphrased, are totally out of step with our present world because our world believes in retaliation. 75 percent of Christians believe in capital punishment because they think we can stop the killing by killing the killers. That's retaliation.

3) "He couldn't fight, either." One day a truck driver stopped at a restaurant for dinner and ordered a steak. Before he could eat it, in walked a motorcycle gang, with dirty leather jackets and long, unkempt hair. They took the man's steak, cut it into six pieces, and ate it. The driver said nothing. He simply paid the bill and walked out. One of the gang members said, "That man couldn't talk. He didn't say a word." Another one said, "He couldn't fight, either; he didn't lift a hand." A waiter added, "I would say that he couldn't drive either. On his way out of the parking lot, he ran over six motorcycles crushing all of them." Something in us loves that story, because we like retaliation. But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus prescribes forgiving love as the Christian trump card.

Introduction : Today's readings explain the basis of Jewish and Christian morality, the holiness of the loving, merciful and compassionate One God. God's chosen people were, and are, expected to be holy people sharing in God's holiness by embodying His love, mercy and forgiveness. Hence, the first reading, taken from the book of Leviticus, gives the holiness code: "Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." It also gives us the way to share God's holiness: "Love your neighbour as yourself." The Responsorial Psalm (Ps 103) challenges us to be like our God – kind, merciful and forgiving. In the second reading St. Paul gives us an additional reason to be holy. We are to keep our bodies holy because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit lives in us. In the Gospel passages taken from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemns even the mild form of the "Law of the Talion, (Lex Talionis)," the Babylonian tribal law of restricted retaliation which Moses passed on to Israel. In its place, Jesus gives his new law of love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and no retaliation. For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life, even though graceful acceptance of an offense requires great strength, discipline of character as well as strengthening by God's grace. The second part of today's Gospel passage is the central part of the Sermon on the Mount. It presents the Christian ethic of personal relationships: love one's neighbours and forgive one's enemies. It tells us that what makes Christians different is the grace with which they treat others with loving kindness and mercy, even if they don't deserve it. We are commanded to love our enemies as Jesus loves us, with agápe love, not because our enemies deserve our love, but because Jesus loves them so much that he died for them as He did for us.

First reading: Lev 19: 1-2, 17-18: The first reading, taken from the book of Leviticus, gives the holiness code: "Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." The reading teaches us that we share God's holiness when we obey the two great commandments: 1) "Love your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. 2) "Love your neighbour as yourself."

II Reading: I Cor 3: 16-23: In the second reading, St. Paul gives us an additional reason to be holy. We are to keep our bodies holy because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit lives in us. The word naos, which Paul uses for temple, refers to the sanctuary, corresponding to the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem where the Lord God chose to dwell. Paul taught that the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them made their community at Corinth and each of its members a holy temple, the naos of God. The indwelling Holy Spirit helps us by His gifts, fruits and charisms to live the very life of Christ.

Exegesis: Mosaic Law of mild retaliation: During their captivity in Egypt, the Jews became familiar with the crude tribal law of retaliation (Lex Talionis = Tit-for-Tat), given by the ancient lawmaker Hammurabi during the period 2285-2242 BC. When this law was first developed, it made life better and more civilized. It restricted revenge and made it commensurate with the offense. Moses instructed the Israelites to follow tit-for-tat retaliation, rather than to wreak total destruction upon their enemies. That is, instead of mutilating or murdering all the members of the offender's family or tribe, they should discover the offender and only punish him/her with an equal mutilation or harm. Later, a milder version of this law was substituted. It demanded monetary compensation as decided by a judge in place of physical punishment. Moses also gave the Israelites several laws commanding merciful treatment for the enemy (e.g., Lev 19: 18). By advising, "Turn to him the other cheek," Jesus instructs his followers to forgive an insult gracefully and convert the offender. He commands that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us to prove that we are children of a merciful Heavenly Father. The meaning of "turn the other cheek" is "Don't return insult for insult." The message of Jesus is, "Don't retaliate." Instead, we are to win over the aggressor with tough, wise love, so that we may win people to Christ and transform human society into the Kingdom of God.

The true Christian reaction: Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount rejects even the concession of milder retaliation allowed by Moses. For Jesus, retaliation, or even limited vengeance, has no place in the Christian life, even though graceful acceptance of an offense requires great strength and discipline of character as well as strengthening by God's grace. Jesus wants his disciples to repay evil with kindness. Instead of retaliation, Jesus gives his new law of love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation and no retaliation. Jesus illustrates the Christian approach by giving three examples. 1) Turn to him the other cheek: Striking someone on the right cheek requires striking with the back of one's hand, and according to Jewish concept it inflicts more insult than pain. Jesus instructs his followers to forgive the insult gracefully and convert the offender. It is interesting that Gandhi said, "Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and His teaching are non-violent, except

Christians." 2) "If anyone sues you to take away your coat (chitona), let him have your cloak (himation) also": (v. 40). Chitona is a lightweight garment like a shirt (but long like a robe), worn close to the skin. A himation is an outer garment like a coat, and is also long. To surrender both chitona and himation would render a man essentially naked, which suggests that Jesus is using exaggerated language to make the point that we are to defuse conflict by yielding more than is required. Jesus teaches that his followers should show more responsibility and a greater sense of duty than to fight for privileges. 3) Go with him two miles. Roman law permitted its soldiers and other officials to require people to carry a burden for a mile. Service of this sort could be quite oppressive. Here Jesus tells us that a Christian has the duty of responding, even to seemingly unjust demands by helping or serving gracefully, not grudgingly. The principle is this: When we respond to an onerous duty with cheerfulness rather than resentment, we may win over the one who gave us the duty.

Christian ethic of personal relationships: The second part of today's Gospel passage is perhaps the central and the most famous section of the Sermon on the Mount. It gives us the Christian ethic of personal relationships: love one's neighbours and forgive one's enemies. Above all, it tells us that what makes Christians different is the grace with which they treat others with loving kindness and mercy, even if they don't deserve it. The Old Law never said to hate enemies, but that was the way some Jews understood it. Jesus commands that we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us to demonstrate that we are children of a merciful heavenly Father. A Christian has no personal enemies. If we only love our friends, we are no different from pagans or atheists.

We need to love our neighbours and our enemies too: The Greek word used for loving enemies is not *storge* (natural love towards family members), or *philia* (love of close friends), or *eros* (passionate love between a young man and woman), but *agápe*, which is the invincible benevolence or good will for another's highest good. Since *agápe* is not natural, practicing it is possible only with God's help. *Agápe* love is a choice more than a feeling. We choose to love, not because our enemies deserve our love, but because Jesus loves them so much that he died for them. We have in the Acts of the Apostles the example of St. Stephen, the first martyr, who prayed for those who were putting him to death.

Life messages: 1) We need to have a forgiving heart: Jesus demands that we should forgive, pardon and be generous whether or not our offenders deserve it, and even if we are not loved in return. He also tells us to pray for those who wilfully cause us suffering, hardship and unhappiness.

2) We are to try to be perfect, to be like God: We become perfect when we fulfil God's purpose in creating us, i.e., when we become Godlike by cooperating with His grace. We become perfect when we try to love as God loves, to forgive as God forgives and to show unconditional good will and universal benevolence as God does.

Joke of the week

1) The Rev. Cleveland Duke of Akron is a part-time judo instructor. He says, "I teach you what to do after you've turned both cheeks." He teaches self-defence.

2) In Bill Adler's popular book of letters from kids, an 8 year-old boy from Nashville, Tennessee makes this contribution: "Dear Pastor, I know God wants us to love everybody, but He surely never met my sister." Sincerely, Arnold.

3) There was a man who was always bragging about his love for children. One day he was pouring a new driveway of cement and some of the little kids in the neighbourhood came running through his yard and ran right through his freshly poured driveway. In fact, this occurred while he was gone, and some even wrote their initials and names in the cement. By the time he got back it had hardened that way with the footprints and the initials and the names hardened for all to see. This man went into a tirade. He was screaming and yelling at the top of his lungs; pacing back and forth about to explode. One of his neighbours came over and said, "I thought you said you loved children." The man said, "Well, I do love them in the abstract, but I don't love them in the concrete."

4) "What does agápe love mean?" asked the teacher. "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's agápe love." (Rebecca- age 8).

Prepared by Fr. Tony (stjohngrandbay.org) and published by CBCI