

## Homily for 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Lev 19:1-2,17-18; Ps 102(103); 1 Cor 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48

Theme: Love those who hate you!

Our first reading from Leviticus 19 deals with moral holiness. In verses 1-2, God asked Moses to say to all the people of Israel: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy. Holy, *kadosh* in Hebrew means 'to be set apart, kept from being profane.' A holy thing or person is that set apart, pure, consecrated, dedicated, or designated as sacred. God is holy and pure spirit, sacred and just in all his ways. The remaining verses in the chapter outline what human beings must do to prove their holiness like God. First, to be holy like God, one must not bear hatred in the heart against another person. Second, there must be openness in speaking about the hurt the other person has caused me. In this way, the person offended does not keep the evil against the offender. In talking about the pain, we are already extending love to the person who has hurt us. Third, there must be no vengeance or grudges. Once the person sincerely speaks out about the hurt, the urge to revenge naturally disappears. The summation of all the points above leads to love of neighbour. You must love your neighbour as yourself. One must treat others as if that action was being done to oneself. Whatever I cannot do to myself should not be done to another person.

In the gospel, continuing his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes his followers back to the Law of Moses and demonstrates how God intended them to love their neighbours. The law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is found in three different instances and books in the Torah, the Pentateuch, in Exo 21:24, lev 24:20 and Deut 19:21. The essence of this law was to prevent people from inflicting injury on others at will and going free. The law also discouraged people from bearing false witness against their neighbours to deliberately put them to death. If someone bears false witness against his neighbour to put them to death, the same punishment is extended to the person who bears false witness (cf. Deut 19:15-18). An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth supports capital punishment as a deterrent measure. It also encourages retaliation of an injured party.

Jesus now wants the people to return to God's original intention. Jesus highlights that revenge and retaliation were not originally part of the ten commandments given by God. The commandment on killing was obvious. 'Thou shall not kill.' Do not take any life. There was no room for retaliation or revenge. However, to forestall repeated killing cases, God asked Moses at the time to permit cases of retaliation and capital punishment. The law against killing was given initially to promote love for neighbours. Now Jesus wants his listeners to go beyond retaliation to that higher form of love.

Jesus then says to his followers to love their enemies. The enemy in the Old Testament generally referred to the other nations, those who worshipped false gods and the Israelites were to keep a distance from them lest those nations turn their hearts from the worship of the true God. The Israelite nation was to be the light to those nations. But Jesus changes this idea because his coming has opened the door to the Gentile nations. Thus, the enmity between Israel and other nations is abolished. That is why Jesus could sit with the Samaritan woman and relate with non-Jews in the gospels. For us today, who do we categorize as an enemy?

The enemy may have been once a friend from whom I have fallen out. Or they may be someone I don't like for some reason or have heard terrible things about them. Whoever it is, how should I relate to that person? Jesus says, 'love the person.' Love is an act of the will – not an act of emotions. What does this mean? I must choose deliberately to do something good for the person who hates me or has offended me. That is an act of love. So when Jesus says, 'love your enemies,' it means always choosing to do good to the person who hates us. I do not plan evil or repay the person with an evil action. That makes sense with the following phrase – pray for those who persecute you. One way of showing love to our enemies or those who persecute us is to pray for them – for a change of heart for them to realize what they are doing. Was that not the prayer of Jesus on the cross, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing?'

Paul tells us in the second reading that we are God's temples, and the Spirit of God dwells in us. Therefore, we act contrary to the ways of the world. In this case, non-retaliation will be seen as foolishness and weakness in the eyes of the world. Because we are God's temples, we cannot harbour evil in our hearts against others, retaliate or hate them. Instead, we become fools in the world for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.