

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

1 John 2:5

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Whoever keeps the word of Christ,
the love of God is truly perfected in him.

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Matt 5:38-48; L79A

Jesus said to his disciples:

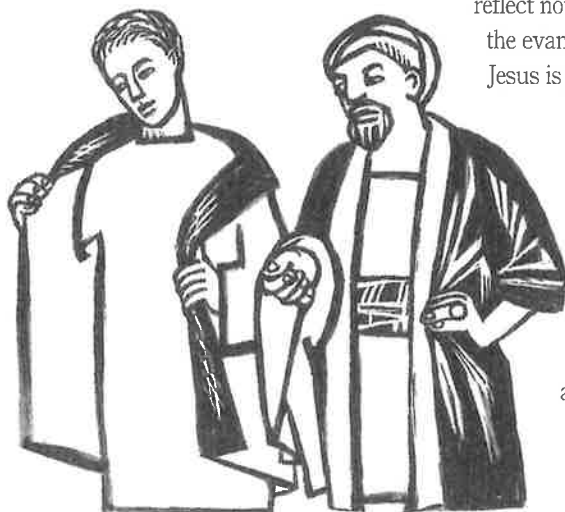
*"You have heard that it was said,
An eye for an eye and a tooth for
a tooth.*But I say to you, offer no resistance
to one who is evil.When someone strikes you on
your right cheek,
turn the other one as well.If anyone wants to go to law with
you over your tunic,
hand over your cloak as well.Should anyone press you into
service for one mile,
go for two miles.Give to the one who asks of you,
and do not turn your back on one
who wants to borrow.*"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,that you may be children of your
heavenly Father,
for he makes his sun rise on the bad
and the good,
and causes rain to fall on the just and
the unjust.For if you love those who love you,
what recompense will you have?Do not the tax collectors do the same?
And if you greet your brothers only,
what is unusual about that?

Do not the pagans do the same?

So be perfect, just as your heavenly
Father is perfect."**Reflecting on the Gospel**

Today's gospel reading from Matthew picks up where we left off last week, in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' own preaching is on par with and actually fulfills the Mosaic Law, which came from God. Jesus' teaching authority is therefore equivalent to God, as Jesus says, "[Y]ou have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." The passive voice "it was said" refers to God's word through Mosaic Law. Jesus uses the active voice, first-person singular, in claiming his own teaching authority. To claim such authority would have been

shocking to those who heard it. The words we have reflect not only Jesus' teaching but also Matthew the evangelist's reckoning that the authority of Jesus is paramount.



In the teachings from last week, Jesus goes to the heart of Mosaic Law, sometimes issuing commands that go beyond the mere letter of the law, such as prohibiting anger (rather than murder) and lust (rather than adultery). In this week's gospel, Jesus goes beyond the "law of retaliation" (eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth). The law of retaliation represented a development in its time (centuries prior to Jesus) by limiting retaliation to one for one rather than five for one. Yet, even this is superseded by Jesus' injunction

to "offer no resistance to one who is evil." The way of discipleship goes beyond strict justice, beyond "legitimate" retaliation, and represents a significant development.

Something similar is at work in the next injunction Jesus issues, which is to pray for one's persecutors rather than hate them. All too often feelings of exclusion and division can rise up in the face of persecution, which is certainly understandable. Striking back in the face of persecution is a natural human response. But the way of Jesus calls his disciples to the lofty goal of praying for those persecutors. Few people have lived up to this ideal, but those who have are known for it, including Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama. If we treat with kindness only those who treat us with kindness, we are merely living the values of the world. Jesus demands that we are "perfect," meaning pure in our devotion to God. Then we will be known as his disciples.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Admiring Jesus is easy to do. He was a gifted teacher, who lived an ethical life. His sayings inspire us, to say nothing of his death and resurrection. Yet, merely admiring Jesus is not what we are called to do. As disciples, we are to follow him. The Sermon on the Mount, from which we read today, is addressed to Jesus' disciples. That is, the Sermon on the Mount is addressed to us. His words should certainly challenge us and our basic attitudes toward life. It's much easier to be evangelized by the modern culture with values of the world. And many of these values are not bad, such as treating with kindness those who treat us with kindness. But Jesus has another way. We are to pray for our persecutors. We are to turn the other cheek. In the face of such injunctions, we may choose

to admire Jesus for his simple advice, while quietly concluding that is not the way the world works. Jesus would agree. He calls his disciples to be salt for the earth, leaven for the world. The conclusion of this journey is not “to get ahead” but to die on a cross. But then comes the promised resurrection. Such is the paschal mystery, which is to be lived, not merely admired.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “I say to you, love your enemies / and pray for those who persecute you.”

To the point: Jesus tells us that, as Christians, we are not simply to eschew revenge, but instead to will and act for the good of our persecutors, tormentors, and enemies. How is this possible? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers the guidelines by which he will live his life of perfect, self-giving love and holiness. From the cross he will pray for his crucifiers: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34; NABRE). The teachings of Jesus are hard. They call us to strip away all hatred and anger in order to be the people we have been created to be, made in the image and likeness of the living God. And when it seems impossible, we can rely on Christ within us, the one who prayed for his executioners, to lead the way to forgiveness and healing.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: In the first reading Moses speaks to the people on behalf of God, urging them to “[t]ake no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people.” In the gospel, Jesus echoes these words and also provides a path for living out these injunctions. If we truly are to “love our enemy,” then we must pray and act. Pray for those who persecute us and give to the one who seeks to take. In the face of enmity and cruelty, Jesus enjoins us to act with the overflowing love and compassion of God.

to experience: At times, it can seem impossible to forgive. When we have been hurt deeply, feelings of anger are natural. In these situations, it is only the grace of God that can give us the ability to respond with love.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The gospel offers us a seemingly impossible commandment: “[B]e perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” And it *is* impossible to fulfill on our own. As humans, we are not capable of perfection. Only through the merciful kindness of our Creator and Lord are we able to live into these words of Jesus. The psalmist reminds us that in God there is no need for fear. The one who made us “pardons all [our] iniquities, / heals all [our] ills.” When we falter and fail, when we sin and wander, our God, in his perfect compassion, redeems us. Removing our transgressions and “crowning us with kindness.”

to psalmist preparation: In striving to be like our heavenly Father, we are called to emulate God’s kindness and mercy, to others and to ourselves. Is there a situation in your life that is calling out for mercy and compassion? How might you embrace the perfect love of God as you move forward?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

In Leviticus, God tells the people, “Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, / do not incur sin because of him.” When do you think it becomes imperative for Christians to reprove their fellow citizens?

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, / and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” What would our society look like if this truth, that the human body is holy, was revered?

In today’s gospel Jesus tells us to “turn the other” cheek. What is your understanding of this phrase and how might you use this advice in a situation you are currently in?

Have you had an experience in your life where you practiced Jesus’ commandment to “love your enemies”? What was the outcome?