

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20 / Matthew 5:17-37)
12.02.2017
Go deeper

“If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven”.

This statement is a strong warning for all of us.

It aimed first at tackling one of the great problems of the scribes and Pharisees, their self-satisfaction and self-righteousness stemming from their obedience to the letter of the Law. They thought that, because of their fidelity to the letter, they had reached the top while, in fact, what they had done was to settle into a place of mediocrity and superficiality.

The scribes and Pharisees certainly ticked all the right boxes and yet they had to discover that God’s call to love echoed by Jesus Christ required of them, as it does of all of us, an invitation to go deeper. Jesus explicitly says to St Peter: “Put out into the deep water” (Lk 5:4). This call to go deeper, to strive for something more, is repeated many times throughout the Gospel, for example when Jesus declares: “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (Mt 5:41).

In the context of our Gospel reading and of the example I have just given, we see that Jesus wants to stimulate our reading of the Scriptures and our generosity. However, more radically, he wants us to be moved by a deep desire which should unsettle us and challenge us to go deeper into what it means to be a Christian. St Benedict expresses the same idea when he encourages his monks to “make more and more progress toward God” (RB 62:4).

For us to go deeper is not a one-off experience, we should not just do it once and then quickly resurface. Jesus’ call to go deeper entails an ongoing process of perseverance and discovery. Life in all its aspects and at every moment places us in front of choices where we can choose either to remain unmoved, skimming the surface of events and people or courageously to go deeper and embrace all the challenges in order to be more conformed to Christ and to his Gospel, and also to be more alive.

This diving into the reality of all the dimensions of our lives and of the life of our world is the way to fullness of life, to real life. In this context, *to long*, *to search*, *to question*, and even *to risk* are synonymous with what Jesus means when he asks us to go deeper.

When we allow complacency or fears to prevent us from going deeper, then we no longer live but merely survive, we are stuck in the mud of our habits and small certitudes.

There is another aspect which is important in our Gospel reading: all the examples given by Jesus aim at challenging the way we relate to one another. And so we have to go deeper in the search and longing for right and respectful relationships.

When Jesus says: “If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven”, he does not think that we can enter into the kingdom of heaven on our own, just by achieving a clean moral life which would not take into account our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Again all the examples given by Jesus clearly reveal that all the efforts we can put into our prayer or spiritual life, into our relationship with the Lord, into our desire to grow in virtue or righteousness are of no avail if they do not convert us into compassionate, truthful, respectful, and merciful people, attentive to the needs of their brothers and sisters.

To go deeper is indeed a personal decision and nobody can make it for us. Yet it is as part of a community, as a member of a Body that the decision to go deeper becomes real and authentically Christian.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus gives us a clue about what it means to go deeper: “It was said to your ancestors: you must not kill (...). But I say this to you: if a man calls his brother ‘Fool’ he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin.”

We see how the scope of the commandments are broadened to an infinite dimension, the dimension of an unconditional and boundless love. And so “you shall not kill” encompasses all that hurts or threatens life in a brother or a sister.

If we want to get into the kingdom of heaven, not only should we not kill physically any other human being, but we should not insult or alienate anyone, we should not deprive any person from the possibility of living and working in peace. Recent declarations make it necessary for me to clarify one last point, “you shall not kill”, this does not mean that we can do whatever we want with another person as long as he or she remains alive; “you shall not kill” implies that we should not torture anybody or impose violent treatments on another human being.

Addressing the Ephesians, St Paul writes: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:18-19).

We have to be careful not to build multiple walls and fences around us whether they are made of stones and concrete or of ideologies or of inner fears. Let us remember that God is engaged in the business of breaking the dividing walls (cf. Ep 2:14). He calls us over and over again to go deeper and to cross barriers.

Whether we think of what is happening in the United States or the situation here in Northern Ireland, as Christians, may we be recognised and known as people who seek to go deeper in love, respect, attention, and care for one another. Let us not be afraid, we have a long way to go before we can reach the point when we go as deep as Christ who, out of love, humbled himself and died for us.