

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Leviticus 19:1-2.17-18 / Matthew 5:38-48)
19.02.2017

Dear brothers and sisters,

“You must love your neighbour as yourself”. We have become so accustomed to these words from the Law of Moses and from the Gospel that they have lost something of their challenge for us. We know that we are called to love our neighbour and we say very easily, without thinking too much about it, that this is what we are doing. But, in fact, to love our neighbour is not as easy as we might think at first sight. There is something radical in these words. To love our neighbour is to be holy as the Lord our God is holy, it is to be merciful as the Lord our God is merciful. To love our neighbour is to love all human beings without exception just as God loves them. If we are honest, I suspect we have to confess that we are not yet there, and are maybe far from it.

In reality, there are people that we don't love and even people we hate... at least at certain moments; they are people that we don't want to meet, people to whom we don't want to speak, people we despise in the secret of our hearts, people to whom we cannot speak the truth, people with whom we want to exact vengeance, people against whom we bear a grudge. Yes, indeed, we are far from loving our neighbour as God loves each one of us.

To love our neighbour as ourselves is a challenge. Why is it so difficult? Probably, there are many reasons. But let us look at one of them. If it is difficult to love our neighbour or at least some of our neighbours, often this is because we don't love ourselves, we are not at ease with ourselves, we are not a good neighbour to ourselves. If we want to love our neighbour, the first step is **to love ourselves**, to be reconciled with ourselves as we are. We have to love ourselves as we are and not as we dream we should be. We have to be reconciled with our personal history. We have all suffered from the education we received at home or in school, education which was given to us with the best intention. But no educator or parent is perfect and the results are there. We all have been hurt in one way or another, and as a result we all suffer. So, the way forward for us is to engage ourselves in a process of healing which includes forgiveness and reconciliation. We have to consent to deal with our past and with our lives as they are. We have to be reconciled with ourselves in order to be able to love our neighbour as ourselves.

In today's gospel passage, Jesus goes much further. The point is no longer only to love our neighbour, but **to love our enemies**. “We have to be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect, he who causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike”. How is it possible to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? To love our enemies is the most humanly challenging of Jesus' demands upon us and yet it is, at the same time, one of the most central of the Christian commandments. We cannot be a Christian without loving our enemies.

Perhaps the first step is to pray for our enemies, to wish them well. This is a way of breaking the spiral of hate which leads nowhere else but to death. By praying for our enemies, we open our hearts and minds to them. We allow life to circulate anew between us.

Praying for our enemies reminds us that we cannot love our enemies with our own strength alone. Only God can give us the grace to love those who have offended us. We have to ask the Lord in prayer for the grace to love those who have gravely offended us or hurt us. Even for Jesus it was difficult to love and forgive those who were killing him. It is surely significant that on the cross Jesus did not say: 'I forgive' to those who killed him, but that he asked the Father to forgive them.

We have also to be careful about the meaning we give to the word 'to love'. To love our enemies has not to be understood first of all as a feeling, but as an attitude of faith. To love our enemies does not necessarily mean that we have to give them a big hug. To love our enemy is to consent to enter into a certain form of relationship with them, to allow life to circulate between them and us. It is a decision that we have to take with God's grace.

We must remember that our enemy is always greater than the offence he has committed against us. Human beings are always much more than the evil they have done. It is not a matter of loving the evil that our enemies do or have done to us, but we can at least love what is good in them. Like us, our enemies were created in the image of God. That image is always present in them, at least to some extent. For this reason, they are lovable. For this reason, let us try to love them.

May the Lord give us a loving and merciful heart, a heart able to love even our enemies! In loving those who do us harm, we shall become holy as the Lord our God is holy; we shall become as merciful as the Lord our God is merciful. We shall become an icon of the living God in the world today.