

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(1Samuel 26:2.7-9.12-13.22-23 / Luke 6:27-38)
24.02.2019
Violence

“To the man who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek too.”

This verse may be one of the most famous verses in the New Testament. It is often quoted by people who want to highlight the irrelevance of Christianity, its unrealistic demands. Who is mad enough to turn the other cheek? At best Jesus' words are considered as naïve, at worst as dangerous.

When we have a problem with a biblical verse, the first thing to do is to connect it with the whole of the Bible. We should never isolate a verse from its biblical context and also from the context of the long Christian tradition and its interpretation.

The second thing to do is to keep in mind that ultimately all the Scriptures point to Christ. They reveal and speak of him. He is the one who unlocks their true meaning.

St Thomas Aquinas is clear on the subject: “Holy Scripture must be understood in the light of what Christ has practised. Thus to interpret the injunction of the Sermon on the Mount literally is to misunderstand it”.

And here we remember that when Jesus was slapped on one cheek, he did not present the other. We read in St John's Gospel that when a guard struck him on the face, “Jesus answered, ‘If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?’” (18:22-23).

Should we conclude that Jesus is inconsistent, or that, at the time of his Passion, he has forgotten the words he spoke just a few months before? Obviously not.

Jesus speaks to us in words and in actions. In our case, Jesus aims at one thing with the words found in the Sermon on the Mount and he aims at another at the time of his Passion. Both his word and his action are supposed to help us to deal with violence in a proper way.

Since Adam and Eve's transgression, violence can be dangerous. In the story of Cain and Abel, violence is “like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1P 5:8) and the Lord warns us that we “must master it” (Gn 4:7). Violence, this energy within us, is part of our wounded soul and according to Evagrius, the devil uses it to compel us to fight against our brothers and sisters in humanity. Like all our feelings and thoughts, violence needs to be healed and evangelised rather than denied or buried. It is to be used as an energy for good and life rather than destruction.

When Jesus invites us to “present the other cheek”, he invites us to refuse the vicious circle of violence. What must be avoided at all costs is what we could call the ‘mirror effect’: you hit me, so I hit you, you hurt my feelings, so I hurt yours, you say bad things about me so I do likewise... All these reactions are doomed to fail because they are symmetrical, they imprison us in a deadly and unending dialectic of violence.

Our self-respect is also at stake here. Do we really want to mirror what we find unacceptable and degrading in somebody else, what we condemn in others? Do we wish to become what we consider as unworthy of our human dignity?

At the time of his Passion, when he is slapped by the guard, Jesus is certainly frustrated and angry. He is legitimately hurt and yet he deals with his feelings in a positive way. He chooses to challenge the guard verbally, to make him responsible for what he has done.

In so doing Jesus shows us that “to present the other cheek” does not mean that we have to remain silent when faced with injustice. It is not a matter of allowing violent acts to go unchecked. Human conscience has the right and the duty to denounce injustice.

What are we doing with the violence which is within us? Do we allow it to express itself in bitterness, cynicism, physical or verbal forms of abuse? Or do we use it as an energy to build bridges of communion and tear down the walls of division, discrimination or alienation which prevent us from relating to one another as brothers and sisters?

To refuse to respond to violence with violence is certainly not the easiest thing to do and yet there is no doubt that this is the most courageous thing to do. Except in the extreme cases where it is a question of self-defence or survival, violence is ultimately a demonstration of weakness. There is greater strength and courage in controlling one’s violence, in channelling it properly than in allowing it to overwhelm us and lead us where we do not want to go. The strong ones are not those who project their violence onto those whom they consider to be their enemy but those who have first mastered the enemy within, and have made peace with the feelings which trouble their hearts.

In order “to fight the good fight” (1Tm 6:12), we must “put on the breastplate of faith and love” (1Th 5:8) and as shoes for our feet whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace (cf. Eph 6:15). Well equipped with faith, love and peace, we will be able to transform the world. Then we will know the blessing of those who have worked wholeheartedly and courageously for peace: God will recognise us as his children (cf. Mt 5:9).