

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Leviticus 19:1-2. 17-18 / Matthew 5:38-48)
23.02.2014

Perfection-Holiness-Sanctity

Dear brothers and sisters,

At the end of today's gospel we have just heard these words of Jesus: "**You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect**". The liturgy invites us to hear this admonition in connection with a verse of our first reading from the Book of Leviticus: "**Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy**".

What is this perfection and holiness we are called to? It is certainly not a kind of flawlessness. The Lord does not call us to a sort of angelic or disincarnate life. To be perfect and holy is not about living in an ivory tower, relating to nobody, cut off and sheltered from the world. It is not about trying to escape the inevitable difficulties of life and the complexity of the world in which we live. On the contrary the perfection and holiness to which we are called are led by the motions of the Holy Spirit. To be called to be perfect and holy is to be invited to become more and more deeply human, incarnate, and firmly engaged in today's world. We cannot do that without making mistakes, and sometimes committing errors and even sins. Obviously we are a far cry here from the pagan ideal of flawlessness. But the Lord is always there with his mercy, ready to forgive us when we repent, ready to raise us up when we fall.

Twenty five years ago, the late Cardinal Daly described our call to perfection and holiness with amazing words. I quote: "Holiness for us does not mean being immune from sin and sinful inclinations. Holiness means having Christ standing by our side, leading us to the sacraments through which we share in the fruits of his passion: our sins forgiven through his cross and our faults cancelled by his goodness. Our holiness is not sinlessness but forgiveness. Saints are sinners who are constantly in need of forgiveness, continually asking for forgiveness, and endlessly being forgiven by God; constantly falling but rising again or rather being lifted up by Christ and given by him the power to begin again and try again. Saints are forgiven sinners. The saint is the sinner who stubbornly refuses to stop trying". Cardinal Daly's words are really powerful. Such is the perfection, the holiness, the sanctity to which we are called by Jesus.

Let us come back to today's gospel. The perfection or holiness to which we are called is God's perfection which we are called to share and then to imitate and reflect. God's perfection consists in "causing his sun to rise on bad men (and women) as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike". What does this mean? This means that God's love for us is greater than the hurts, the pains or the sins we inflict upon him. In God's eyes, we are greater and more precious than our sins, we are bigger than our infidelities to his covenant, for the one who created us out of love and sent his Son to save us by giving his life for us.

Called to be perfect, called to be holy, we must remember that we are called to reflect the same kind of love as God shows. We are called to give this same love to our neighbours. But, if we are honest, we have to confess that sometimes it is difficult to recognize that our offender is greater than the offence he has perpetrated against us. It is difficult for us not to reduce the other to his limitations. And yet, we all have limitations. The point for us is to see the full picture and not to become a prisoner of or obsessed by what is only a part, a detail, even if it is an important detail of the ensemble.

Jesus does not go in for half measures. For him, the call addressed to us to be perfect, to be holy includes “loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us”. To Love our enemies does not mean to put our arms around them and give them a big hug. To love our enemies is to choose not to allow the wrong done to us to destroy us or to destroy our enemies either. To love our enemies means to allow life to circulate between us. It means to listen to our enemies and speak with them, to look at them, to try to understand what is happening within them. To love our enemies begins with our prayer for them and this is often a slow process. In many circumstances, to forgive is beyond our strength. Ultimately it can only be a gift from God, a grace to ask for in prayer, a gift to receive and share.

To be perfect is also to go beyond the law of retaliation, the well-known “tit for tat”, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth”. We go beyond the law of retaliation by breaking the spiral of violence and injustice in the world. To break the spiral of violence is not an act of weakness but an act which requires from us great strength and courage. Very often this requires from us moving beyond the common opinion. For example, it is often said that we can forgive our adversary only if he first repents. Jesus’ call to holiness goes as far as to invite us to engage ourselves in a process of forgiveness even if our adversary does not repent explicitly. Experience proves that often it is forgiveness offered which actually brings the offender to repent.

To be perfect, to be holy as God is holy! Such is the challenge before us. Our whole life is not too much to take up the challenge. The challenge before us is far beyond our own strength alone. But with God’s grace and gift, everything is possible. May we become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect!