

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time A - I am an Honourable Doormat. I won't retaliate!

February 23, 2020

This Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 5:38-48) is a continuation of last Sunday's. It is the famous **"turn the other cheek"**. Have you ever asked yourself: what was Jesus thinking with this "turn the other cheek" stuff? Are we supposed to be "doormats"? (BTW, if we say that someone is a doormat, we are criticizing them because they let other people treat them badly and unfairly, and do not complain or defend themselves. If we always give in to others we will end up feeling like a doormat). Is Jesus recommending that our calling card be **"Honourable Doormat. aka I won't retaliate."**? If we read the Gospel just word by word. Jesus's words might seem to indicate the "doormat approach", but we Christians know Jesus is not wimpy. We see Jesus as the Saviour and Lord, defender of the poor and mistreated, nothing equates to "doormat". So how are we to interpret these words of our Saviour?

Yes, many people do criticize Christianity for this teaching and say that followers of Jesus are just wimps. They say that instead of fighting for what's right, Christians passively allow themselves to be taken advantage of: **turn the other cheek**. It doesn't make sense when this world is full of power struggle, conflicts, sins, killing and violence. In Jesus's time, the Roman Empire was built by force and violence, but it passed away a long time ago. Christ's Kingdom, the Church, is built on the deeper power of forgiveness and unconditional love. It has not only outlasted the Roman Empire, but is still growing today. In the first centuries of Christianity, when the Roman Empire tried to destroy the Church by force, by persecution, it was precisely the Christians' power to forgive and endure that made the Church survive and grow. And no matter how unjustly the Christians were condemned, no matter how cruelly they were tortured, they never condemned their enemies in return. Instead, they simply explain the gospel, and then lived it out by being faithful to Christ up to death. If we give in to bitterness, hatred and vengeance, we lose the power of God's Grace working in our hearts conquering evil, ending destructive violence and bringing resurrections out of crucifixions.

Schoolyard bully happens in one's early childhood, then it continues on in the work place, in marriages, on the road, in all kinds of businesses and organizations. In some ways, we are all people who are full of petty jealousies, hatreds and spites. A personal remark or a cutting word from someone automatically sparks off a row and revenge is sought immediately. The world we live in has raised vengeance to the level of virtue and pours scorn on the weakling who doesn't seek retaliation. We see and hear that a lot on the political scene. When we grow to hate someone we give that person power and control over us which eats into our heart and destroys our peace of mind. In the Gospel Reading for this week Christ rejects this law of revenge and insists on his followers to repay evil with kindness, hatred with love. So in exhorting us to turn the other cheek Christ is not commanding us to be an enabler of people doing bad things but telling us to love our enemies as ourselves. If we love our enemies in this way, we will want to help them be what we ourselves want to be: people trying to love and obey Christ. By offering pardon and show forgiveness, we evangelize the Good Word, rise to the level of Christ.

Yes, it isn't an easy reading today. But it is also not an excuse to do nothing, for Jesus is speaking about our actions on behalf of ourselves, in our own self-interest. Our agency, our defence, our protection is not for ourselves, but for the sake of others. If we are to follow our Lord's path, we are to use our personal power, influence, reputation, gifts, and wealth on behalf of those who have no power, influence, wealth, or reputation. Being perfect is treating the "evil and the good" and "the righteous and the unrighteous" as God treats them, providing them with the same opportunity to live as everyone else. Again, our witness is not true and authentic if we portray to the world actions that preserve only ourselves. Our witness is to be given in actions that show our desire to see that all know the benefits of the love of God. This is difficult, because it forces us to move ourselves out of the center of the relationship; our center is focused on another. We are asked to submit to the love of God which can show us the way. We are only ever truly safe in the love of God.

So, are we to be doormats? Are we to meekly submit to the persecution of this world and our enemies? Apostle Paul says, **“By no means!”** (1 Corinthians 9:22). What we are to be is simply to protect not only what is our own, but also seek to protect others. This profound lack of self-interest and self-protection is rooted in the desire of a community of believers to protect one another, to make sure that all people in all communities, both enemies and friends, have access to the means of life and know the benefit of God’s awesome and amazing love.

When we wake up every morning, do we pray for those responsible for causing suffering, inflicting hardship and bringing unhappiness into our lives? The challenge is to decide whether hatred or love is the main motivating factor in our lives. Love of a neighbour is always the distinguishing mark of a Christian.