

70a, 2017

Today's readings speak of the essence of holiness. Since we are mostly good people, I have to ask: what is so important about trying to be holy? Well, we should be holy because God himself is holy and we have been created in God's image. This leads us to ask: then, what is holiness? Does it consist in saying many prayers? In spending long hours in church? Yes, but it is so much more. It is taken for granted that we normally act in our own self-interest, but the gospel says that we are to act equally in our neighbor's interest as well. Because in the long run, it is also in our own long-term interest not just so we can enter into heaven, but for the time that we are left with here on earth.

In the gospel, as Jesus continues to teach his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, he again reminds his hearers that more is expected of his disciples than was laid down in the Old Testament. "You have heard that it was said: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. To me that sounds like a command to take vengeance, but on the contrary, it was a counsel for self-restraint—only hurt your opponent to the same degree that he or she hurts you and no more.

But Jesus proposes a quite different approach. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, then offer him the left cheek as well; if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also with him a second mile as well..."

What an impractical recipe! How could any self-respecting person follow such wimpish advice? Aren't we taught that to be a man you don't take such things lying down, you give as good as you get, and sometimes even a little more... But recall that God wants us to be holy as He is holy. It might be good for us to recall that while hanging on the

cross, after hours of torture, Jesus says: Father, forgive them because they know not what they are doing.

And so, is it really wimpish? Who is the really the stronger person: the one who lashes out in anger or the one who remains fully in control of himself and refuses to be brought down to the same level as an attacker? (I am sure that especially you who are in law enforcement could supply numerous challenges that you yourselves have faced,) but now let us examine three examples of the gospel in action:

- 1) The Jesuit writer John Powell tells of a man who used to buy his newspaper from a man who always treated him rudely. One day a friend saw this and asked the man why he put up with such behavior. The man replied: Why should both of us be rude? Why should I allow another person to manipulate my feelings? We would all do well to think of those times when we allowed others to make me into someone I didn't want to be.

- 2) In the film "To Kill a Mockingbird," Gregory Peck plays the part of a white lawyer defending a black man, who as it turns out, was wrongly accused of raping a white woman. One day one of the white townspeople comes up to Peck and spits in his face in order to express disgust at a white man defending, as he put it, a nigger who raped a white woman. Peck stands there dignified and silent and slowly wipes the spit from his cheek. He says nothing; he does nothing. But it is clear which of the two men has lost his dignity.

- 3) And lastly let us look at Jesus when he stood before his accusers. During his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was struck on the cheek and accused of impertinence. And so how did he respond?

Did he turn the other cheek? Not exactly. Did he hit back? No, rather he simply said: If I have done any wrong, tell me what it is. If not, why do you strike me? He simply speaks to his accusers in quiet, reasonable terms in a totally non-violent way. He retains his dignity while they lose theirs through violence and abuse. He does not cringe before them; in fact, he stands up to them.

Let us make it very clear. In the way in which Jesus understands it, turning the other cheek is not weakness; it requires tremendous inner strength and security. We do not see much of that kind of strength from the macho characters on our t.v. screens. There the slightest offence is often replied with fists or bullets. But, as we know from the various flashpoints around the world, such actions are bound to fail. It failed in Northern Ireland; it is failing in Israel; it failed between India and Pakistan. And there are countless other examples. (Those of you in law enforcement are daily confronted with such challenges; I've also read about firemen and women being attacked while trying to put out a fire. And people in pain often need someone to blame and since medical care folks are available, they often bear the blunt of their anger, fear and frustration simply by being present.

It should be obvious that due to your jobs some of you are forced to use force, but all that is asked of you is that the force you use is measured and appropriate to the situation. Don't allow the hate-mongers take control of your lives and rob you of your self-control.)

Now to continue, Jesus is not finished yet with what he is trying to teach us. "You have heard that it was said: You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good

alike and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous alike. For if you only love those who love you, what virtue would you attain?

I am now tempted to ask: Is Jesus out of his mind? Does he really expect genuine, red-blooded human beings to react in such a way to hostility and violence? How can we possibly love people who do us harm, whom we know to be evil, wicked and corrupt? Are we really to love the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, terrorists, and sexual abusers..?

The problem here is the word "love." Generally speaking, to say that we love a person is to have warm feelings of affection towards them or even to be in love with them. Is Jesus asking me to have the same feelings for my spouse and family as for some terrible human monster? And the answer is unequivocally, NO!

"To love" in the gospel context here means to "wish the wellbeing of." It is a unilateral, unconditional desire for the deepest wellbeing of another person. It does not ask me "to be in love with," to have warm feelings for an ugly human being who is doing me and others serious harm. That would be ridiculous. But we can sincerely wish the wellbeing of those who harm or persecute us. We pray that they may change, not just for our sake, but also for their own sakes as well. We pray that from hating and hurting people, they become loving and caring people.

Far from being unreasonable to pray for hate-filled people, there are no people who need our prayers more. On the other hand, to hate them in return is simply to make ourselves just the way they are, to reduce ourselves to their level. And we see what happens in our world when hate and violence are returned by hate and violence.

Let the truth be known that nothing eats away at our innards more than resentment, anger, hatred and violence. Sometimes we think we

can punish people by hating them, but it is we ourselves, who then become the victims. And of course, it is our attitude to hostile and misbehaving people that the genuineness of our concern for people is really tested. As Jesus says, it is easy to care for the people who are close to us, who are good to us. To paraphrase the gospel, even terrorists love terrorists. The Mafia is known for its loyalty to its members, but not to anyone else.

The passage concludes with Jesus saying: Be perfect, then, as your heavenly Father is perfect. This obviously is an ideal, a goal to be aimed at. And the perfection intended is not total perfection, but rather to aim at that total impartiality of a God who extends his providential care and love equally to all. So, if we want to identify with Him, we have no right what so ever to withdraw our love from a single person. Whether that person returns our love or God's love is their problem and their loss. It cannot become our problem!

Let us not, then, just see this teaching of Jesus as pie in the sky, something that is a hopeless ideal. If we reflect on it, we will begin to see that this is the only reasonable way for us to deal with people both for our own personal growth and fulfillment and as contributing also to the personal growth and fulfillment of others. Jesus is not asking us to do something impossible and unreasonable but to open our eyes and see what is the only really sensible way to live and relate with the obnoxious people around us.

And why should we treat other people with such reverence and concern? Because, as St. Paul says today, "you are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple...and so is that person who causes you frustration.

All in all, we are being called upon to recognize and respond to God's presence in every single person we meet, irrespective of how they

behave. And that is true even when the person acts in ways totally contrary to God's way. In fact, it is precisely then that the God in me is challenged to reach out and affirm the God in the other. Mutual violence only weakens God's presence in both of us. Paradoxically, the worse a person behaves, the more that he or she is crying out to be loved and cared for. And for many of us, such an attitude towards life may take some major convincing...

At the beginning of the homily, I said that the theme of today's readings was "holiness." Hopefully we now have some further insights into where real holiness is to be found.