

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, A<sup>1</sup> – February 19, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

The Lord Jesus refers to the ancient Jewish *lex talionis* or “law of retaliation” in the gospel we hear this Sunday. The old law said, “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth”,<sup>2</sup> and was enacted to limit revenge, not encourage it. For example, if someone took out one of your eyes, you were not entitled to take out both of his – that would only escalate the violence. So the old law aimed to restrain human wickedness, but at the same time, could not eradicate it.

Christ, in contrast, legislates something new: “Turn the other cheek”, he says. To be slapped with the back of the hand on the right cheek was a gross insult; it implied that the person hit was inferior. And our natural instinct is to hit back. Jesus, however, effectively says that it is better to find a creative way forward, reflecting the patient love of God. By offering the other cheek, you are basically saying: “Hit me again, if you wish; but this time, treat me as an equal, not an inferior”.

In a similar way, the Lord says that if your opponent in law would take the tunic off your back, you should give him your cloak as well. In those days and in that region of the world, a poor man would have been wearing just two garments: a cloak and a tunic. By surrendering both of them, he would have shown his opponent what he was really doing: reducing a poor man to nakedness and shame.

Then the Lord refers to another situation that the people of that time knew well: that of being pressed into service to help carry equipment for a Roman soldier. The military had the right to make civilians do this – but only for one mile, not more. Very well then, Christ says: surprise them by offering to go two miles. That is far more constructive than making an official complaint, or plotting revenge by joining a resistance movement. You would be showing the Romans that there is a different way to be human, a way which reveals God’s justice and mercy.

These three little scenes give glimpses of God’s way for us to live a truly human life. And it is certainly not easy – but Jesus does not ask us to do anything that he did not do himself. When people challenged his teaching he told parables: quizzical and often humorous stories, which forced them – and us – to think differently. When they mocked him, he did not respond. When they struck and scourged him he accepted the pain, uncomplainingly. When they made him carry the burden of the Cross, the ultimate symbol of Roman domination, he carried it as far as he was able and then had the humiliation of someone helping him with it; then, as the soldiers hammered the nails, he prayed for them.

The challenge for us is to rise above any tendency to pettiness or vengefulness and see a wider and better way to handle our problems. The Lord is not telling us that we may not defend ourselves; no, there is a strong biblical case for self-defense, and the Church teaches us that we have the right and sometimes the duty to defend ourselves, our families, and our society, when safety is threatened.<sup>3</sup> But when we reflect upon what Christ teaches in today’s gospel, we see so many areas of life to which it can apply: so many areas where a creative solution, involving tolerating some injustice – some wrongdoing on the part of someone else – can bring about a greater good.

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<sup>1</sup> This homily draws heavily upon one written by Fr. Fabian Radcliffe, O.P.; see <http://torch.op.org/torch/gods-way-to-be-man>.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 24:20.

<sup>3</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 2263-2267.

It comes down, again, to living the way I've been preaching about these last few weeks,<sup>4</sup> as we've gone through the Sermon on the Mount: the imitation of Christ. He shows us God's way to be human. And if he shows us the way, he will certainly also lead us to truth and to life: life with him both here and now, and forever in heaven. Christ is not giving us good advice; he's giving us good news. We need to have confidence in his grace – that divine help that will transform us and help us to live the way he commands.

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically: last week, and two weeks before that.