



## 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time



**Date:** Sunday, February 19, 2017 | **Season:** Ordinary Time before Easter | **Year:** A

**First Reading:** Leviticus 19:1–2, 17–18

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13 | **Response:** Psalm 103:8a

**Second Reading:** 1 Corinthians 3:16–23

**Gospel Acclamation:** 1 John 2:5

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 5:38–48

**Preached at:** the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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**I**n today's Gospel Jesus uses three images to capture the new justice he is proposing to his followers. It is a creative, healing, and restorative justice that focuses on relationships. The old justice found in the Bible was designed to prevent revenge running away with itself. It was better an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth than a battle which had each side trying to outdo the other in finding new ways to do violence. But Jesus goes one step further than the Old Testament's advice. He says it is better to have no vengeance at all, but rather to find a creative way forward. This reflects the absolute and patient love of God himself, who wants Israel to shine his light into the world so that all people will see that he is the one true God, and that his deepest nature is overflowing love. No other god in history encouraged people to behave in a way like that!

So Jesus gives us hints of the sort of thing he has in mind when he uses these three images. But these images are quite tied to Jesus' cultural milieu, so allow me to unpack them a little for you. To be struck on the right cheek, in that world, almost certainly meant being hit with the back of the right hand. That was not just violence, it was a very pointed insult: it implied that you were an inferior, perhaps a slave, or a child, or even a woman. What was Jesus' answer to such an insult? Hitting back would only perpetuate evil. Instead he proposed offering the other cheek so that you could be slapped not as an inferior but as an equal.

Or, he says, suppose you were in a court of law where a powerful enemy was suing you (perhaps for not paying a debt you owed) and he wants the shirt off your back in reparation. You can't win in court; but Jesus proposes that you clearly show him what he is doing. He says "Give him your cloak as well"; You see at

that time, most people only wore those two garments, so to offer him the shirt and cloak would leave you naked and this would shame the powerful enemy for leaving you naked. This is what Jesus says the rich, powerful and careless do. In their greed, they reduce the poor to a state of shame. We should all be ashamed of the poverty in our world today.

The third example Jesus uses clearly reflects the Roman military occupation of the time. Remember that Roman soldiers had the legal right to force civilians to carry their equipment for one mile. But the law was quite strict; it forbade them to make someone go more than that. So Jesus wants to turn the tables on the Roman military occupation. He advised that we do not become angry and plot revenge or grumble, but rather he invites us to imitate our generous God. He says don't go one mile only, but go two. This would have startled the Roman soldier (and perhaps scare him—because what if his commanding officer found out that this civilian was going more than one mile?). Jesus is showing us there is a different way to be human, a way which doesn't plot revenge, which doesn't join the armed resistance movement, but which wins God's kind of victory over violence and injustice, through peacefulness and generosity.

Of course these examples come from Jesus' time. But I'm sure we can all think of examples in our world today, where perhaps the first reaction might be a temptation to anger or revenge, but dare we imagine responding in the way Jesus is inviting us to, by being kind and generous. The one example that comes to my mind is when I'm driving – allow the other person to go in front. Smile at the taxi driver who cuts in front of me. But I'm sure you all have your own examples. Let us think tonight on how we can reflect God's generous love despite the pressure and provocation, despite our own anger and frustration?

At the end of the Gospel Jesus says: “If you greet only your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional?”

We all know that as Christians we should love our neighbours. But this love is not just some specific actions towards specific individuals. It is that. But it is also a general attitude of how we relate to everyone. Not just each other – but those who are not Christians, and who are not our friends. Christian love promotes cordiality, sincere affection and friendship between people – even people who are different from us. This cordiality is not merely external courtesy required by a proper social upbringing – it is not just good manners. It is not the

spontaneous affinity we have for people we take a liking to. It is the sincere attitude of one who has been purified and inspired by Christian love. We all know someone who we can say is very sincere. They are friendly, warm, open individuals who do not gossip or take sides. They welcome everyone and everyone welcomes them because they value that welcome, that inclusion, that love.

Cordiality helps people to feel good about themselves, eases tensions and conflicts, furthers understanding, strengthens friendships, and helps fraternity grow. Cordiality helps people rid themselves of feelings of selfishness and rejection, because it is directly opposed to our tendency to dominate, manipulate or make others suffer. Those who know how to accept and communicate affection in a healthy and generous way create around them a more human world in which to live. In this age of polarization – of party politics and factional infighting – how refreshing is this good news from Jesus to be cordial, to love each other. To not be angry or vengeful, but to be peaceful and generous and kind with each other. If we only greet our brothers and sisters, Jesus is right – are we being exceptional? Of course not. Jesus always wants us to go further. Not one cheek but two. Not one piece of clothing but two. Not one mile but two. Not just good manners, but sincere affection borne out of Christian love.

Jesus' teaching isn't just good advice, it's good news. Jesus did it all himself, and he opened up this new way of being human so that all of us who follow him can discover it. When they mocked him, he didn't respond. When they challenged him, he told quizzical, sometimes humorous, stories that forced them to think differently. When they struck him, he took the pain. When they put the worst bit of Roman equipment on his back—the heavy cross-piece on which he would be killed—he carried it out of the city to the place of his own execution. When they nailed him to the cross, he prayed for them.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't just about us. If it were, we might only admire it as a fine bit of idealism, but then we'd then return to our normal lives. The Sermon on the Mount which we have been hearing in Church these last few weeks is about Jesus himself. This was the blueprint for his own life. He asks nothing of his followers that he hasn't faced himself. And, within his own life, we can already sense a theme that will grow larger and larger until we can't miss it. If this is the way to show what God is really like, and if this is the pattern that Jesus himself followed exactly, the Evangelist Matthew is inviting us to draw the conclusion: that in Jesus we see the Emmanuel, the God-with-us person. The

Sermon on the Mount isn't just about how to behave. It's about discovering the living God in the loving, and dying, Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world that needs it so badly.

Let us all pray today that we might find ways to live this new, creative, healing and restorative justice Jesus is proposing to us: to be more generous, more kind, more Christ-like, more God-like. Let us never allow ourselves to give into anger or revenge. Let us remember the words we pray in the Our Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Amen.

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