

Wholeness beyond holiness

7th Sunday of the Year A: 23 February 2020

Readings: Lev 19:1-2; 17-18; 1 Cor 3:16-23; Mt 5:38-48

“You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48)

Note: Today’s first two readings speak about a holiness that goes beyond following mere rules and regulations. The gospel exhorts us to strive for a Christ-like perfection since it is only through unconditional love and forgiveness that one attains perfection and can be considered as growing in wholeness and in holiness.

Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. For the major part, the Book of Leviticus deals with rules, rubrics and regulations involved in the worship of Yahweh, which was specifically the preserve of the priestly tribe of Levi. Since this tribe was expected to uphold its dictates and directions, the book got its name from ‘Levi’. Although the Book mentions the dos and don’ts of the covenantal law given to Moses, the final form to the book was given much later in time—sometime only after the Babylonian Exile around 500 BC. Chapters 17-26—from which today’s passage is taken—form a corpus called the Law of Holiness. The first two verses of chapter 19 serve as a prologue and provide the rationale why God’s people should strive for holiness: *“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”* Just as a child is supposed to be ‘a chip off the old block’, so to say, so must God’s specially ‘chosen’ children resemble their Parent-God and aim to be holy like God. In the context of the covenant, holiness would mean separateness and distinctiveness from the world. Indeed, the prime attribute of God was ‘Holiness’; and, just as a mobile phone gets charged by being connected to the mains, so too, by being connected and covenanted with Yahweh, Israel was expected to be holy. In sum, holiness is, firstly, an indicative: You *are* holy. Secondly, it is also an imperative: You *shall be* holier still.
2. The “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18) injunction at the end of the first reading sets the tone for reflection on the gospel passage where Jesus’ teachings ‘go the extra mile’, so to say, and surpass Mosaic Law. In the First Testament, ‘brother’ or ‘neighbour’ exclusively meant a fellow Israelite. The fact of being God’s ‘chosen people’ or ‘elect’ led to a sense of superiority over others and the demarcation of a closed ‘inner circle’. Jesus would break all these boundaries since he had come to love and serve all people. In continuation with last Sunday’s four teachings from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, today’s passage has two antitheses pertaining to revenge and love. First, the old law stipulated “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Lev 24:19-20)—known as the ‘*lex talionis*’—which in those times was regarded as a fair and just amount of retaliation or revenge. If this attitude were adopted, said Mahatma Gandhi, “All human-beings would soon be blind and toothless!” Jesus abrogates the right to retaliate. Furthermore, he proposes that evil be countered not by an equal amount of retaliatory evil but an overdose of good.

3. Jesus' mandate to "love your enemies" is not the negation of any old law that said, "Hate your enemies" but rather it poses a challenge to what we regard as a commonsense, normal response to those who hurt us. Surely, enemies must be hated, not loved. At the most, one can tolerate them. But, Jesus situates the teaching of loving one's enemies not simply at the normal, human level, but on the firm foundation of God's love for you and me. Indeed, one must love one's enemies precisely because one is loved by God. Thus, Jesus places Abba, His Father, as the source and supreme standard of love. By saying: "You must be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus reminds us that we are created in God's "image and likeness." What he exhorts and expects of us is not the perfection of love but the striving for that perfection, which will slowly and surely be realized when we realize that we are gifted with God's Spirit. This Spirit will enable us to love, to serve and to forgive. In fact, Paul tells you and me in the second reading: "God's temple is holy, and that temple you are!"

Connection of the Second Reading with the Theme:

With Paul reminding the Christian community at Corinth that they are temples of God, the holiness theme overflows into the second reading. However, reiterating the radical newness in the understanding of holiness which Jesus preaches, Paul criticizes the divisions that afflict the church at Corinth. Groups were saying, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos" and so on. Each faction was boasting about the 'knowledge' (*gnosis*) it had received from its leader. Saddened by the divisions, Paul accuses the Corinthians of defiling the Body of Christ, the Church, by appealing to individual founders rather than to the Head, Christ, "who belongs to God." Ultimately, we have all come from God and will find our fulfillment in God alone.

The response to today's psalm (103) proclaims and reveals that "The Lord is compassion and love." The verses extol God's attributes: love, mercy, compassion, forgiver of guilt, healer of illnesses, redeemer. All these attributes of God ought to be models for us, who claim to be God's children.

An Apt Anecdote: King Janaka of ancient India was greatly revered by all for his holiness. Once, while listening to a discourse from a holy guru together with some citizens, a herald announced, "The king's palace is on fire!" Everyone rushed towards the palace since they had relatives working for the king or fields surrounding the palace. King Janaka remained unmoved. Thinking that Janaka hadn't heard him, the herald shouted louder, "Your palace is burning!" Annoyed, the king replied, "Let my palace burn! It's more important that I become holy by listening to my guru rather than run to save my palace."

In Lighter Vein:

Commenting on this passage one Sunday, a preacher asked his congregation: "How many of you love your enemies?" Not a single hand was raised except that of a very old woman at the back of the church. "Tell us all how you manage to love your enemies," said the preacher. "I'm ninety," said the old woman, "I love my enemies and I'm happy that all of them are dead!" Jesus' challenge is not to love enemies when they're dead, but to love them throughout our lifetime.
