

## FEBRUARY 19, 2017 SUNDAY

### **Reading 1 LV 19:1-2, 17-18**

The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy. "You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."

### **Responsorial Psalm PS 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13**

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

He pardons all your iniquities,  
heals all your ills.

He redeems your life from destruction,  
crowns you with kindness and compassion.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD,  
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.  
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,  
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he put our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

### **Reading 2 1 COR 3:16-23**

Brothers and sisters: Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool, so as to become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: *God catches the wise in their own ruses*, and again: *The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain*. So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

### **Alleluia 1 JN 2:5**

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Whoever keeps the word of Christ,  
the love of God is truly perfected in him.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

### **Gospel MT 5:38-48**

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow. "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, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

### **Reflection:**

TODAY'S MASS SPEAKS of the essence of holiness. And why should we be holy? We should be holy, because God himself is holy and we have been created in his image. But what is holiness? Does it consist in saying many prayers? In spending long hours in the church? The

First Reading today says it consists negatively, in not hating your own kind, and positively, in loving one's neighbour as oneself. It is taken for granted that we normally act in our own self-interest. However, the Gospel says we are to act equally in our neighbour's interest as well. Because, in the long run, it is also in our own long-term interest not just in our future life but here on earth. *No vengeance*: 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'." That sounds like a command to take vengeance. On the contrary, it was a counsel of self-restraint -- only hurt your opponent to the same degree that he/she hurts you and no more. Also, retaliation could only be authorized by a court. In our own time, it is not unusual to see people take vengeance far beyond the hurt that was done to them. *The non-violent approach*: But Jesus proposes a quite different approach. "Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile..." 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 things lying down, you give as good as you get, and even more...? Yet, is it really wimpish? Who is the really strong person: the one who lashes out in anger or the one who remains fully in control of himself? The one who refuses to be brought down to the same level as his attacker?

#### *Three examples*

Let us look at three examples of the Gospel in action:

a. 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 behaviour. The man replied, "Why should two of us be rude? Why should I allow another person to manipulate my feelings?" b. In the film "To Kill a Mockingbird", Gregory Peck plays the part of a white lawyer defending a black man accused (wrongly, as it turns out) of rape. One day one of the white townspeople comes up to Peck and spits in his face to express his disgust at a white man defending 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. (And, of course, it turns out that it was a white man who raped the girl.)

#### *Example of Jesus*

c. Jesus before his accusers. During his trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus was struck on the cheek and accused of insolence. How did he respond? Did he turn the other cheek? Not exactly. Did he hit back? No. He simply said, "If I have done any wrong, tell me what it is. If not, why do you strike me?" There is no anger, no vindictiveness, no abuse. He simply speaks to his accusers in quiet, reasonable terms in a totally non-violent way. He retains his dignity while they lose theirs in 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 TV screens. There the slightest offence is to be replied to in a hail of bullets and bombs. But, as we know from the various flashpoints around the world, it is bound to fail. It has failed in Northern Ireland; it is failing in Israel; it has failed between India and Pakistan. And there are countless other examples.

#### *Dealing with enemies*

But Jesus is not finished yet. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour 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, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the pagans do the same?"

Is Jesus out of his mind? Does he really expect genuine, red-blooded human beings to react this 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, to love the terrorist, the sexual abuser...?

#### *Problem of love:*

The problem here is the word 'love'. Generally speaking, to say 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 life companion as for some terrible human monster? 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 someone 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. We pray that from hating, hurting people they become loving and caring people.

All in all we are being called on to recognize and respond to God's presence in every single person and creature that 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 has 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 one is crying out to be loved and cared for. At the beginning, we said that the theme of today's readings was 'holiness'. Perhaps we now have some idea just where real holiness is to be found.