

## Commentary to the 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

### WHAT DO YOU DO FOR FREE?

#### Introduction

In front of his school colleagues, Ernesto says, 'I respect everyone, but if they kidnap my child, I certainly will kill the responsible.' Joseph is an employee; one day, he comes home upset with anger for the injustice suffered and confides to his wife: 'I have to make Luigi pay! When he needs a favor, he will have to ask me on his knees, and I will make him wait until when I want.' George, a jeweler, was robbed three times and threatened to be killed; now he keeps a gun with him to defend himself.



Let us evaluate these three attitudes. We all agree in considering that Ernesto, Joseph, and George are not wicked. They do not attack those who do good; they just react against those who do evil. Violence, retaliation, and revenge have their logic and can be justified.

Maybe we do not share the way they intend to restore justice, but the goal that the three aim at is not evil. They just want to punish and deter those who commit reprehensible actions. We could say that they are just people. They respond to good with good and evil with evil. But is it enough for Christians to be just in this sense? He who is inwardly transformed by love and by the Spirit of Christ goes beyond the logic of people and places in the world a new sign: the love towards those who do not deserve it.

To internalize the message, we repeat: "*Love your enemies, to be children of your Father who is in heaven.*"

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**First Reading: 1 Samuel 26:2.7-9.12-13.22-23**

In those days, Saul went down to the desert of Ziph with three thousand picked men of Israel, to search for David in the desert of Ziph. So David and Abishai went among Saul's soldiers by

night and found Saul lying asleep within the barricade, with his spear thrust into the ground at his head and Abner and his men sleeping around him.

Abishai whispered to David: “God has delivered your enemy into your grasp this day. Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I will not need a second thrust!” But David said to Abishai, “Do not harm him, for who can lay hands on the Lord’s anointed and remain unpunished?” So David took the spear and the water jug from their place at Saul’s head, and they got away without anyone’s seeing or knowing or awakening. All remained asleep, because the Lord had put them into a deep slumber.

Going across to an opposite slope, David stood on a remote hilltop at a great distance from Abner, son of Ner, and the troops. He said: “Here is the king’s spear. Let an attendant come over to get it. The Lord will reward each man for his justice and faithfulness. Today, though the Lord delivered you into my grasp, I would not harm the Lord’s anointed.” —The Word of the Lord.

David did not soften in the face of enemies or forget the evil that had been done to him (1 K 2:1-9). He committed many crimes; he soiled his hands, shedding much blood (1 Chr 22:8), but the episode narrated in today’s reading shows that in him there were noble and generous sentiments.

Here's the fact: Saul is chasing him and, at night, he camps in the wilderness of Ziph. David sees him and decides to meet him. The venture is risky, but Abishai, his nephew, a brave warrior, offers to accompany him. The two arrive at Saul’s camp, and they find him asleep amid the soldiers. Abisai now proposes his solution, right and sacrosanct, according to the reasoning of people: *"Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear, I will not repeat it"* (v.8).

David does not listen to him; he chooses forgiveness: *"Do not harm him—he says to his nephew—for he is the anointed of the Lord"* (v.9). Here we are faced with two opposite ways of thinking. The first—that of Abisai—is dictated by human logic that aims to attack, destroy those who have done evil, and continue to be a danger to society. The second—that of David—is unconditional forgiveness.

Jesus—as we will see in today's Gospel—will make another step forward: he will invite us to go beyond the same forgiveness. He will demand from his disciples that not only do no harm to the enemy but also take the initiative to meet him to help him out of his condition. The choice of forgiveness made by David is already a significant step towards the love of the enemy that the Master preaches.

Why is Saul spared? It is because—David says—despite being guilty, he remains forever the Lord's anointed. For the same reason, even the worst criminals cannot be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment or even be killed. He is to be loved and helped to recover because he is

and will always remain an anointed of the Lord, one in whom the image of God is indelibly marked.

## Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:45-49

Brothers and sisters: It is written, *The first man, Adam, became a living being*, the last Adam a life-giving spirit. But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, earthly; the second man, from heaven. As was the earthly one, so also are the earthly, and as is the heavenly one, so also are the heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one. —The Word of the Lord.

What will be left of us after death: only our spiritual part (will we be evanescent ghosts, like zombies), or will we have a body? And, if we will have a body, will it be the same as what we have today? That was an issue much debated at the time of Jesus. Paul initially shared the views of his teachers, the Pharisees, and claimed that at the end of the world, everyone would have recovered the body they had in this world (cf. 1 Thes 4:14-17).

This Jewish idea of the resurrection presents considerable difficulties: how God can let a person die and then resurrect in the same body is hard to understand. What sense would it be? It would be making a mockery of people. Then, how is it possible to recover a body already dissolved into dust for so long? And which body would be recovered: that of our youth, or that of our old age, ugly, sickly as they generally are at the point of death?

In the light of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul understands better the meaning of the Christian vision of eternal life. Writing to the Corinthians, he says that it is not this material body that resurrects. Each person will receive from God a spiritual body. He does not resurrect only a part of us; it is our whole person that enters into the glory of heaven, but with a body entirely different from what we have in this world—a body not made of atoms and molecules.

To explain further, Paul makes a comparison: the seed—he says—is placed in the ground and disappears; it is as if it were dead, yet, after some time, it reappears in a new form of life (1 Cor 15:35-44). Looking at the tree, who would recognize the seed from which it originated? This is what happens to man: his material body (that sometimes is battered as the dried core of a fruit) is left in the ground. He instead ‘resurrects’ in God's world for a different life. He does not carry the body he had; he is reborn with an incorruptible body that does not need food or sleep; a body that does not suffer does not get sick and can no longer experience death.

In today's reading, the apostle says that this transformation is not the result of man's natural power, like what a seed has within itself. It is the work of the Spirit given in baptism, the Spirit who, as he made Jesus rise from the dead, will raise us also. So, as we have carried in us the

image of Adam, the earthly and mortal man, we will receive the resemblance to Christ, the head of the new humanity.

The reading invites us to reflect on the major enigma of man: death. If death is the moment when one passes from this world to that of God, if it marks the birth of the new form of life, then it should not be considered a misfortune but the completeness of our existence in this world.

### Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples: “To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, and get back the same amount. But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” —The Gospel of the Lord.

After proclaiming the disciples blessed because they are poor, hungry, crying, and persecuted, Jesus addresses the crowds and enunciates a shocking principle: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you ... and pray for those who treat you badly* (vv. 27-28). Four imperatives—love, do good, bless, and pray! This does not leave any doubt about how a Christian should behave in the face of evil. This is unequivocal evidence that Jesus rejects the use of violence in the strongest terms.

Against the offender, we react instinctively with aggression. We believe that by ‘making him pay,’ justice is restored, and everyone is given a life lesson. Jesus disagrees with such hasty solutions. He repudiates the use of violence because this never improves the situation. It complicates it even more and does not help the wicked to change their ways. It crushes him, triggers the hatred, and awakens the desire for revenge and vengeance. Violence may be able to eliminate the wicked, but not to save him. The only attitude that creates anew is love.

There are Christians who recognize, very honestly, that by trying, they will succeed in loving those who caused them irreparable damages: those who have slandered them, ruined their career, and destroyed the serenity and peace in their family, or even killed a family member. Jesus does not demand that we become friends with those who do us harm. He did not feel sympathy for Annas and Caiaphas, the Pharisees, for Herod whom he dubbed "fox" (Lk 13:32), or for Herodias who had the Baptist killed (Mk 6:14-29). Sympathy is beyond our control; it cannot be ordered; it arises spontaneously between people who respect each other and are attuned to each other.

The Master asks us to love, not to look to one's rights, but the needs of the other. It is not enough not to respond to evil with evil. One has to accept others. It is a must always take the first step to reach out to one who did wrong, to help him get out of his plight.

It is not easy. That is why prayer is recommended. Only prayer puts off aggression, disarms the heart, communicates the feelings of the Father who is in heaven, and gives the strength that comes from God's love. Prayer, for the enemy, is the high point of love because it presupposes a heart willing to be purified from all forms of hatred. When one puts oneself before God, one cannot lie. One can only ask God to fill the evildoer with good, and when one manages to pray like this, his heart is in tune with the heart of the Father who *"who makes his sun rise on both the wicked and the good, and he gives rain to both the just and the unjust"* (Mt 5:45).

In the second part of the passage, Jesus explains his principle with four concrete examples: *"To the one who strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek; from the one who takes your coat do not keep back your shirt. Give to the one who asks and if anyone has taken something from you do not demand it back"* (vv. 29-30).

The disciples are not prohibited from demanding justice, from defending their rights, from protecting their properties, honor, and life. They are not cowards who tolerate oppression, abuse of power, and harassment of the weak. Love does not mean to endure in silence without reacting.

A Christian is very actively committed to putting an end to injustice, bullying, and theft. To restore justice, he rejects the methods condemned by the Gospel. He does not resort to arms, violence, falsehood, hatred, or revenge. *"He does not pay evil with evil ... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him to drink ... Do not let evil defeat you, but conquer evil with goodness"* (Rom 12:17-21). When one is unable to restore justice through evangelical means, what remains for a Christian is patience. This virtue indicates the ability to withstand, to resist under a heavy weight. When the only way that remains open is to hurt a brother, one who can support the weight of injustice shows himself a disciple of Christ.

The passage continues with the so-called golden rule: *"Do to others as you would have others do to you"* (v. 31). It does not mean that we have to take our selfishness as a measure of good to be done. Jesus just gives a wise counsel on what to do to help those in difficulty. He suggests

that we ask ourselves this question: what would we like others to do for us if we were in his condition? How would we want to be helped? Would we be happy if they attack us, humiliate us, and would use violence against us? Let us be honest when we demand justice for a wrong suffered. Often, we do not seek the good of the other; we think only of taking revenge. We observe, for example, how, in front of an offender, the behavior of a judge is different from that of a mother. The judge renders judgment based on a code and wants to re-establish the rule of law while a mother keeps aside all the regulations and is guided by her love and thinks only of recovering the child.

In the following verses (vv. 32-34), Jesus considers three cases of “righteous” people: they love those who love them, do good to those from whom they receive good, make loans, and then get the requital. These people do good deeds, no doubt, but their behavior can still be dictated by calculating self-benefit.

The expression ‘what kind of grace is yours?’ repeated three times in these verses wrongly translates the original Greek. It is the parallel text of Matthew that speaks of ‘merits’ (Mt 5:46). Luke chooses instead, and with much finesse, another term; he says: where is your grace, that is, what do you do for free. It is the gratuity that characterizes a Christian's action and allows us to identify, unequivocally, the children of God.

He continues: *"Love your enemies"* (v. 35). It indicates the privileged situation in which it is possible to manifest gratuitous love. Here we touch on the pinnacle of Christian ethics. The proposal of Jesus relates to some texts of the Old Testament: *"If you see your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, take it back to him. When you see a donkey of a man who hates you falling under its load, do not pass by but help him"* (Ex 23:4-5; cf. Lev 19:17-18.33-34).

Even wise pagans gave similar advice. We remember those famous ones of Epictetus: ‘One needs to be beaten like a donkey, and that, while being beaten, he loves who strikes him as the father of all, as a brother’; and Seneca: ‘If you want to imitate the gods, do good also to the ungrateful because the sun also rises on the wicked.’ The statements of the aforementioned Stoic philosophers seem identical to those of the Gospel; however, in reality, they are dictated from a radically different perspective.

*"Do good to them and lend where there is nothing to expect in return,"* suggests Jesus (v.35). And this recommendation excludes all seeking any self-advantage, even spiritual.

Unlike that of the Stoics who were not acting for the good of others but aiming to achieve inner peace, imperturbability, and complete self-mastery, a disciple does not allow himself to be touched by any selfish thought, any complacency, or any search for personal gratification. He does not even think to accumulate merit for heaven. He loves and gives completely.

What reward will these selfless givers receive? *"It will be great!"*—Jesus answers. Will they have a better place in heaven? No, much more: *"They will be children of the Most High; for he*

*is kind towards the ungrateful and the wicked"* (v.35). This will be the prize: the similarity with the Father, enjoying his very own happiness, experiencing, already on this earth, the ineffable joy in loving without expecting anything in return. The passage ends with the exhortation to the Christian community members to make visible in the eyes of people the face of the heavenly Father (vv. 36-38).

In the Old Testament, God presents himself with the following words: *"The Lord is a God full of pity and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in truth and loving-kindness"* (Ex 34:6). Mercy—the first of his features—is not to be identified with compassion, forbearance, and forgiveness of offenses. Merciful means—in biblical language—sensitive to the pain, misfortunes, and needs of the poor and the unfortunate. God does not just feel this emotion but intervenes in performing deeds of love and salvation.

Jesus invites his disciples to cultivate feelings and imitate the actions of the Father who is in heaven. With two prohibitions (do not judge, do not condemn) and two positive warnings (forgive, give), he also explains how to imitate the Father's behavior.

He who is in tune with God's thoughts, feelings, and behavior does not pronounce sentences of condemnation against a brother. The Father—who knows the inner hearts—does not condemn even at the end of time. Anyone who has a piercing look like his, who sees a person as he sees, condemns no one. He is moved only before the one who wrongs (Hos 11:8) and is committed in every way to get him back to life.

Consequently, we could summarize the message of the Gospel saying that there are three categories of people: on the lowest rung are the wicked (those who, while still receiving the good, do evil); higher are the righteous (those who respond to the good with good and evil with evil); and finally, there are those who respond to evil with good. Only the third category are the children of God, and they reproduce in themselves the behavior of the Father.

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