



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A-February 23rd 2020

***Readings: Leviticus 19: 1-2 17-18, Psalm 102, 1 Corinthians 3: 16-23,
Matthew 5: 38-48***

There are a few phrases from the Bible that still leak into the popular culture – in spite of its otherwise almost total ignorance of Scriptural warrant. Today’s Gospel gives us one of them.

‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth....’ – the Lex Talionis of vengeful reciprocity.

We tend to regard this with the disdain of a superior culture these days. What, after all, could be more primitive than a simplistic punishment that inflicted the same damage on the perpetrator as he had inflicted on his victim? The Lex Talionis, quoted by Jesus, has a fascinating and complex history. Part of early Babylonian law codes, as well as later Roman, it appears, in the Old Testament, in a very specific context. We need first to understand the ancient context which prompted the necessity and popularity of such a law. It was not seen as a brutal and violent extension of the law but rather a limiting and liberal measure. Before its introduction, for example, if your village killed one of my village’s sons, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that this blood feud would swiftly escalate in revenge upon revenge culminating in our decision to settle final accounts by destroying your village wholesale, slaughtering your menfolk and children and selling your women into slavery. The Lex

Talionis accepted revenge justice but imposed proportionality. The judgement should not exceed the offence. Indeed, in the Old Testament, this law is expressed in brutal terms but is promulgated in a culture which has no record of penal amputation or mutilation. The phrase is figurative. Indeed the judgement is specifically restricted to cases where a plaintiff lies about a supposed offender. If the plaintiff is found to be a false witness then his punishment will be whatever it would have been for the falsely accused. That seems to me, humanly speaking, to be a wise and admirable deterrent. The Lex Talionis is therefore a humane measure. It limits revenge. Jesus, however, takes us deeper into the origins of our blood feuds – man with fellow man. And here we encounter a more profound ethic yet. One that separates the Christian approach – and understanding of God – from all other religions. Those who speak glibly of all religions being ‘the same’ – or worse, professionally gibber on about the equal value of the great religions, need to read the books. In pantheistic Hinduism, for example, the Law of Karma is a fairly broad expansion of the Lex Talionis – you get what you deserve.

There is no room for mercy in the mechanism of Karma.

In Islam, while Allah is constantly advertised as merciful, that mercy is not assured, no salvation is envisaged except through the personal hard work and submission of the individual. Mercy is a powerful concept but it is difficult to see how it applies except with the same mechanistic process as pagan Karma. Even if it were to be more quixotic, there is no certainty.

Jesus gets behind the mystery of sin and our powerful desire for revenge. The exhortation to love our enemies is, humanly speaking, ridiculous. It is a counsel, not of perfection but of suicidal insanity. At least it is until we are completely in Christ – fully submerged in the mind of God, fully submitted to the Divine Law as an expression of His eternal, creative and loving purposes.

It insists that we see even the most reprehensible offender and villain as originally made by God, like us in His image, capable of redemption, reconcilable to the Father, possible sharer with us in salvation – temporarily lost brothers and sisters, adrift of the pilgrim road.

This is a big call. We are asked to walk with Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, looking out through blood blinded eyes, stumbling in the dust and looking up to see the faces of the crowd, the sorrowing, the confused, the mocking, the sinful, the persecutor AND STILL pressing on to the Calvary to die for them all. And on that Calvary to encounter the beauty of the Penitent Thief, the dying villain who, even yet, is capable of repentance and an appeal for mercy.

Jesus asks us fragile human beings to see with the eyes of God. He dares to assert that His love operating through us will be transformative. The designation of ‘our enemies’ is a necessary judgement within the human framework. We are not wrong to see it as such. BUT we need to see beyond that. Enemies can only be defeated by terminal violence or by conversion to the common mind of God.

Loving our enemies does not mean being naive or foolish about their capacity for harm but always keeping that higher dimension in mind and as the mainspring of our dealings with them. If our fundamental intention for them is loving, seeing one another as children of the same Heavenly Father, estranged from one another by sin and history, then we are walking in the Way of Christ. In the face of our wilfulness His love is embarrassing. In the face of our enemies we should similarly embarrass them with our willingness to overcome their hostility with the subverting power of love – by reflecting the Eternal Mind and Salvific intention of God.

The Lex Talionis is not a bad place to start. It is just not a good place to finish.

The mercy of God is, thank God, always greater than the mercy of Man.

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