

Sunday, February 23, 2014

7th in Ordinary Time (A)

Conventual Mass

Be Holy As I Am Holy

Some months ago, I read of a criminal case in the Middle East, or perhaps it was in Africa. A man who had severely paralyzed another was given an injection in his back to effect the same paralysis he had caused in the first: An eye for an eye. It seems barbaric to us, yet when this law was developed in ancient times, it was meant to limit the punishment to the crime. Otherwise feuds and vendettas involving entire clans would go on forever threatening to destroy society. We remember the wide scale slaughters that have taken place as the result of such feuding in our time. I need only to mention Kosovo and Rwanda.

Leviticus 24:20 repeats the same theme: “fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has disfigured a man; he shall be disfigured.” The book of Leviticus was meant as a book of laws governing priests and levites, mainly governing ritual, sacrifice, cleanliness, votive offerings and dues as well as the purity of the community.

The fourth part of Leviticus, although it also contains prescriptions, prohibitions, and rituals is clearly different. Here we find what is commonly referred to as the “Code of Holiness.” The prescriptions given here are meant to remind the people that in their daily actions they (and we) are to show forth the holiness of God. If we are to be God’s people we share in the awe filling, total otherness of the holiness of God. “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

The Scriptures stress God’s total otherness, his transcendence and forbids anything that would make us believe that we could break in upon God or force God by some magical rite. And yet, and yet, the same Scriptures proclaim the nearness of God who becomes involved in our history, who makes a covenant with human beings, and invites them to share in his holiness.¹ And in the last days is manifested as one of us.

In the last analyses the Code of Holiness reflects the behavior of God: to be like God, who does not bear hatred for us, but chastises sinners that they may repent and live, to be like God who is all merciful, and to love our neighbor as ourselves because God is love. To share in God’s holiness we must become like God, to imitate God’s compassion and tenderness.² And so the Israelites are told in this verse of Leviticus “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Lev 19:17).

Jesus said: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). And so he brings the law to a new and deeper understanding. The Jews understood the word “neighbor” in the law to refer to other Jews. Jesus makes the word mean anyone we encounter. The neighbor of our first reading has now become the Good Samaritan, the despised enemy, yet the one who responds to anyone else, especially someone in need.³ This is the fulfillment, the perfection of the law.

As a result of the law of love, Jesus asks his disciples not to return evil for evil but to return evil with good. When you think about it, if we return evil for evil, we are drawn into a vicious snare that intensifies and multiplies evil. The Christian is to be the

messenger of God and to bring goodness, wholeness, and salvation into all areas of life. “Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord.” The holiness of God overcomes and transforms all that it touches. Witness the cross of Christ, the forgiveness of Christ which in its very abasement was transformed by Love and so routed the forces of Satan.

Jesus gave four examples to illustrate his principle: to turn the other cheek, to surrender one’s cloak when asked for the tunic, to walk the extra mile, and to give to the one who asks. Literally applied, the behavior stated in the gospel could have negative consequences for others, or for the common good. What Jesus is asking is that his disciples make a deliberate choice to act nonviolently even towards those who unjustly wrong them. It is above all a call to nonviolence in the heart, towards peace, a peace that springs out of love of others. It does not mean that we are doormats, that we yield to injustice and violence, but that we be peacemakers in word and actions.⁴ It is in imitation of the one who on the cross asked forgiveness for those who crucified him.

Forgiveness is an important component of today’s message. Forgiveness is rooted in love for others demonstrating that share in the holiness that is God’s, and basic to Christ’s message. Recently I read a book on an army chaplain, Father Emil Kapaun. Fr. Kapaun was a chaplain in World War II and in the Korean War. He, together with his unit were taken prisoners and suffered horribly, inhumanely. They were starved, beaten and died by the hundreds. Fr. Kapaun saved many lives on the battlefield and saved many more in the prison camp by his encouragement, his sacrifices, and his ministry. He himself was to die under wretched conditions. Knowing how his men suffered, yet he constantly preached forgiveness even in that hell hole.

[Funchess, one of the sick soldiers lying next to Kapaun] asked about forgiveness. “Of course we should forgive them”, Kapaun said of their captors. “We should not only forgive our enemies but love them too.” But they shot wounded soldiers, Funchess said, “They abused prisoners. It doesn’t matter, Kapaun said, “If we fail to forgive, we’re rejecting our religion.”⁵

Fr. Kapaun was dying, and the other prisoners tried to hide it from the guards. But it was no use. They took him to the death house to die where he would lie with the dead and dying unattended without food or water, covered with vermin.

“The stretcher bearers reached the entrance to the Death House. Kapaun raised a hand and blessed the guards...Kpaun looked at Nardella. In heaven, he said, he would pray for Nardella’s return home. Then he glanced at the waiting Chinese: “Forgive them, for they know not what they do”, he said. He looked at a Chinese officer and said, “Forgive me.”⁶

Fr. Kapaun is to us a heroic figure. Yet all of us are called to follow Christ. Christ forgave because he loved and we are to follow in his footsteps. Normally, it will not entail the type of heroism exemplified by a Fr. Kapaun, but we are asked to practice this God like love, this holy love in all the encounters that make up our daily lives. Even a Fr. Kapoun had to struggle and so learn in the day to day events of his life.

End Notes

- ¹.Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.4 (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1992) 63
- ².Days of the Lord, 64
- ³.Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (N.Y., Paulist Pr, 1994) 169
- ⁴.Days of the Lord, 67, 68
- ⁵.Roy Wenzl and Travis Heying, The Miracle of Father Kapaun (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2013) 65
- ⁶.Roy Wenzl and Travis Heying, 69