

## Sunday 7A 2020

There is a saying, 'don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good'. In other words, don't let the fact that you may not be able to do everything to 100% of your satisfaction prevent you from doing anything at all. So what is this perfection which Our Lord sets before us when He says, 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'? Perfection, as we find it in St Matthew's Gospel, contains the idea of fulfilment, of maturity, of reaching our goal, of being who we have been created to be. When St Luke writes about this particular bit of Christ's life, he gives us this phrase as 'be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful'. Compare this with what we see in our first reading, from Leviticus: 'Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy'. We need to draw our understanding of 'perfect', then, from all these sources: perfection, mercy, holiness. And, because we know instinctively, I think, that we are *not* perfect, even if that lack of perfection is found in ways we'd never admit to anyone else, then we also need to understand that our drawing closer to living our perfection, mercy, and holiness, is a lifelong journey of growing into grace.

Part of the problem with the whole idea of being perfect lies in our inadequate imaginations. If we can't imagine perfection very well, how can we be perfect – or how what steps toward perfection are the right ones? There is a great little essay by George Orwell which gives us a bit of help. Here, he is talking about happiness, and he says,

It would seem that human beings are not able to describe, nor perhaps to imagine, happiness except in terms of contrast. That is why the conception of Heaven or Utopia varies from age to age. In pre-industrial society Heaven was described as a place of endless rest, and as being paved with gold, because the experience of the average human being was overwork and poverty.

This, of course, can be quite attractive. But the pitfall is, as Orwell goes on to say, that 'nearly all creators of Utopia have resembled the man who has toothache, and therefore thinks happiness consists in not having toothache.' We want perfection to remove our obvious problems. And we are often much better at spotting the imperfections in others than we are in ourselves. To the man who has toothache, a world without toothache is all he wants. But he might also be proud, unkind, a liar, full of lust, greed, envy; and these in that moment he is less concerned about. It's easy to see where other people get things wrong; it's less easy to be honest with and about ourselves.

But we're in luck, because we don't have to guess at perfection: we can take Our Lord Himself at His word, and His example. And what He's saying here, when He says 'you have heard that it was said, you must love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' is exactly what perfection – or mercy, or holiness, or charity – looks like, what it's for, and how it works. If you genuinely pray for the good of another person, praying for God to grant that person what will make him or her happy, fulfilled, flourishing, and, yes, even perfect – what you aren't doing is praying for all the things about them that hurt you to be taken away. And that is an incredibly challenging thing to put before us. It involves thinking about relationships, mercy, forgiveness, prayer, perfection, holiness, the grace of God, in ways which ought to make us uncomfortable if we follow them to their logical conclusions. Suddenly, the person in your prayers isn't an enemy any more, but rather a neighbour, whom you must love as you love God, and as you love yourself.

This is solemn and worthy and challenging, but here's the other hard bit: the world and human beings being the way we are, is it not possible that we might be the object of such prayers from those whom we have hurt? That there is someone out there trying desperately to use the grace of God to pray for our wellbeing, instead of for us to disappear into a hole in the ground? In fact, if we try to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, and at the same time acknowledge that there might be people out there trying to love us, and trying to pray for us, *everything* becomes a little bit different, a little bit transformed, a little bit transfigured, charged with the grandeur of God.

I think – I hope – that most of us are quite aware of the ways in which we are not perfect. That there are things which God alone knows about us, things we could and would only ever admit to in the sanctity of the sacrament of confession, which spring instantly to mind if you are ever asked, 'what makes you *not* perfect', but which you will never say out loud. Those are exactly the things about ourselves that God wants us to give us grace to receive and to co operate with. And it's for precisely those things that, alas, we are least ready to turn to him for help with. So, since Lent is about to begin, use the words that Our Lord is saying directly to you in today's Gospel about what holds you back from perfection, to resolve to confront them in the holy season that's about to begin, to bring them into the light, to cleanse them, to transform them, so that the power of God can be shown forth in our weakness, and so that we can dare to strive to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.