

Week 7 Ordinary Time - 2023

Lev. 19:1-2. 17-18; Psalm 102:1-4 Cor 3:16-23; Matt 5:38-48

A polish priest recently wrote these words in a little booklet which I think I was sent by accident:

We want to become saints, but in the easiest way possible, without effort, without fatigue or violence to our selves: we should like to practice virtue, but only to a certain point, only when it does not ask for great sacrifice, or go too much against the grains. And so it happens that when faced with acts of virtue which exact greater self renunciation, or the acceptance of difficult and repugnant things, such as quelling the resentments of self-love, renouncing an attempt to make our opinion prevail, submitting ourselves and meekly condescending to one who is opposed to us, very often – if not always- we refuse, thinking it unnecessary to go to such lengths.¹

Today's Gospel seems to compliment these words quite well: *'if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer them the other as well'*² Really, is this what I am called to do? You don't have to accept Jesus's words, They are too much and un-realistic. They don't seem to be very sensible and they are not grounded in the real world. If someone punches you and you offer no resistance there is a high likely-hood that they will keep on punching you. However they are spoken in the middle-eastern mindset of hyperbole, an exaggeration to make a point and help make it stick. Yes, there is truth in his words, but he expected balance and reasonableness in application.

Furthermore we know biblical symbolism when we meet it. The right hand side is frequently used to represent justice. So to strike someone on the right hand side is to strike against justice. Furthermore, A physical blow for most people would be delivered by an assailant from the strong right hand and landed on the left of the victim's face. The blow in the Gospel lands on the right of the face which indicates that it is delivered with the back of the hand, or by the weaker left hand. Therefore, the image of the strike can quite likely mean an insult rather than physical blow. So Jesus is probably saying, "don't respond to an insult with an insult." Thank goodness. That is much more achievable and still remains virtuous, without going overboard. Or is it? Is it really more likely that Jesus really meant this? Or have we just made the Gospel, Gospel-lite. Have we added enough water to the wine so that it still has a little of the colour of wine without much of the taste.

Jesus loses his temper a few times in the Gospels, most notably when he enters the temple and cleanses it of sellers of pigeons and money changers: 'You have made my Father's House into den of thieves.'³ In this single instance he uses a whip made of rope and upturns the tables. But he does not do this for his own sake, but for his Father's only. At other times – I think I am quite safe in saying this- he uses angry words and insults – calling a well respected man a white-washed tomb is pretty insulting – to convey his displeasure. But he does not use them to defend himself: he defends others. His Father first, and then the people who turn to him.

¹ Stehlin, Fr. Karl, in Kight of the Immaculata, No. 26

² Matt 5:40

³ Paraphrase Mark 11:15-19

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'Jesus said to Peter, "put your sword in its sheath."'⁴ Jesus says to the High Priest after being punched in the face, '*Why do you strike me?*'⁵ According to St Luke, the crucified and dying Jesus says: '*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*'⁶

I think Jesus might well have said exactly what he meant with those words, '*if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer them the other as well*'. I fully believe that the Ukrainians can and should use military means to defend their families and their country against the Russians. I fully believe that people can and should speak out in protest over killing of the unborn and the elderly. I fully believe I should speak when the teachings of the Church are under wholesale attack. But I also beginning to think that when it is me who is under attack, that maybe, I really am called not to retaliate. And that is really, really hard, because the desire to correct a wrong, the welling up of anger and outrage against an affront and the almost immediate striking out after an assault is almost overpowering and instantaneous.

I would like to water down Jesus's words, I truly would. But for some reason, under an overpowering sense of his presence I can feel him watching me, penetrating right into the depths of my heart, and I am made un-easy. I find that I am unable to water down His words under His gaze.

The wine is full-bodied, and he is telling me to drink. Dare I?

⁴ John 18:11

⁵ Ibid 18: 24. In

⁶ Luke 23:34