

## Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

“You must be perfect - just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” (Matthew 5, 38-48)

This last verse of today's gospel in which Matthew has Jesus talking about perfection has caused lots of unnecessary problems for many of us. Somehow or other we got the idea that perfection is something we are supposed to have already achieved. Knowing in ourselves that such is simply not possible, most of us have settled for a “make-do” position. That has probably not done much for our self-image or, indeed, for our hope. However, if we are prepared to look at the words which Matthew puts into the mouth of Jesus as an attempt to express the dream Jesus has for us all, we might come to accept that perfection is something we are all working towards and that religion and religious practice are quite frankly a process in which we engage in order to help us to grow towards perfection. It seems to me that Matthew's Jesus is saying: “If you could only give more than is necessary to those who beg from you, if you could start loving your enemies and praying for the people who deliberately make life difficult for you, then you'll begin to realize the dream I have for you to become more and more like God.”

Don't you find just a touch of irony in the fact that some of the challenges listed for us in today's gospel are attitudes and practices we grow into with a little bit of maturity? Many of us, for instance, have learned the hard way that God “makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil.” (Matthew 5, 45) Some of us have struggled with the fact that good people suffer while villains prosper. The prophet Jeremiah complained to God: “Why do the wicked prosper and the treacherous all live in ease?” (Jeremiah 12, 1) And the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in one of his sonnets:

“Why do sinners ways prosper? And why must  
Disappointment all I endeavour end?”

However, it's also true that the hard knocks in life and the failures which we all experience, shape us into becoming more compassionate and understanding of others when they make mistakes. The rigid categories of our youth, our tendency to see things as “black” and “white” fade as we mellow and lose the edges of aggression and defensiveness and become more at home with ourselves.

The French priest and philosopher, Maurice Nedoncelle, reflecting on such change within us wrote: “When a man reaches the age of fifty, he has often come to the conclusion that the laws commonly held to be the expression of an eternal system of morality have continued to evolve in the course of his own life. He notes that this is due to the fact that a considerable number of individuals have emancipated themselves from them, and so have ‘done wrong’. He is forced to recognize that, while sometimes the law has recorded a lowering of the standard of morality, yet changes due to the increase of sin have their good side, and even, in certain cases, register moral progress.”

While there will be some people who might want to interpret what Nedoncelle has written as “rationalization” or “capitulation to low standards”, there is still enough in what he says to demonstrate that, with age, we do become more compassionate and tolerant of the excesses of those around us. We grow to a point where we would not want to withhold the sun or rain from anybody. However the urgency of the Jesus in

today's gospel would have us be open to accepting right here and now what he knows we will eventually grow into. He wants us to be ready to bless the life around us as his Father does. That's his hope and dream for us all.

People through the ages have struggled with both their internal dissatisfaction at being incomplete and this outside call from Jesus to grow towards perfection. This struggle is articulated by the Broadway actor who proclaimed: "God never made a better woman than I am, but somehow I just can't seem to live up to it." (from a homily by Pastor Dale Beaman, United Church of Christ, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2009))

It is likewise bewildering for some when others around them actually respond to the challenge to grow better, and make some progress. There's a delightful Chinese story that illustrates this:

An ancient Chinese warlord took one of his generals aside and ordered him to attack a certain city and destroy all his enemies who were inside. There was to be no quarter given and no enemy spared. A few days later, the warlord himself went to the city and found the city gates open and his general and soldiers feasting with the city inhabitants. Furious, he stormed up to his general and demanded why he had not destroyed his enemies: "But I have," the general replied. "You can see for yourself that they are now our friends."

Jesus knew, deep down, that he was unlikely to ever make old bones, so he grew "old" ahead of his time and put words to the dream that he hoped we would all one day reach.