



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

An eye for an eye

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

In today's readings Jesus reminds us of the Law under which His society lived. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is often quoted as a shorthand summation of Old Testament legal principles and it makes its first appearance in Exodus Chapter 21.

The immediate priorities of Chapter 21 are women and slaves and the *Lex Talionis*, as it is called, constitutes a major step in the history of mankind's recognition of the value of the human person. The case is described where men are fighting in the vicinity of womenfolk. A pregnant woman miscarries as a result. The man whose violence caused the death of the unborn child must answer for it. However, if any consequential harm befalls the woman then the aggressor will pay, "*life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, stripe for stripe.*" Here for the first time is a recognition of the value and reality of the life of the unborn child and the moral seriousness of causing an abortion. The first application then of *Lex Talionis* is a massive statement about the value of womanhood, motherhood and the sanctity of life.

The next appearance of "an eye for an eye" is in the book Leviticus Chapter 24 v. 20 and it is very specific. It is to do with disfigurement. If a man deliberately disfigures another man the same shall be done to him, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" etc. It is a penalty for random violence as well as for deliberate torture.

In all of these cases, it must be remembered, that the *Lex Talionis* was, for ancient societies, an imposition of mercy. In its attempt to be just and to be seen to be just it signified the limitation of vengeance without diminishing the value of the human person. In prescribing a visible, realizable and equitable response to injustice, the *Lex Talionis* sought to prevent disproportionate response and the pattern of unending retribution.

The final appearance of the *Lex Talionis* in the Torah is in Deuteronomy Chapter 19 v. 15-end. Here *Lex Talionis* is invoked on false witnesses. If you give false evidence against a man which, had it been true, would have condemned him to suffer the death penalty then that will be your fate. If your lies would convict him and sentenced him to prison, beating, massive fines then that will be your sentence. Whatever penalty your intended victim was due becomes your punishment, and a proper response to a peculiar wickedness. "*The rest*", says Deuteronomy, "*shall hear and fear and shall never again commit any such evil.*" Today, when false accusation is the nightmare scenario of every professional, we may have some sympathy with this invocation of the *Lex Talionis*.

Without this human beings will begin to circumvent the law and dispense their own 'justice'. This is to invite a journey back into the wilds of merciless retribution. The *Lex Talionis* is not vicious primitivism but a part though not all of the wisdom of divine mercy.

At first glance Jesus's words in Sermon on the Mount seem to turn all this carefully balanced individual and social justice on its head. But before we rush to simplistic and precipitate judgment we should note that, at the same time, Jesus prefaces his teaching with this completely orthodox declaration :- *'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.'*

It is in these last few words that the key to the Christian community lies. The Law is God's gift to sinful man. In the midst of our iniquity and fallenness it is a guide, target and arbiter focusing us back on the justice and mercy of the Father. Law is a deterrent to sin and a guide to righteousness. It cannot, of itself, bring holiness or reconciliation with the All Holy Himself. Jesus is talking not just about the divine gift of the Law for social order but about nothing less than salvation. The quest for Heaven is about more than the avoidance of Hell. Reconciliation with God is about having his image restored in us - *"to be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect"*.

The citizen requires, for his safety and equanimity, a system of law that does not depend on his own ability to apprehend, prosecute, punish, restore or recompense. He requires a Law that balances the powerful and the powerless, that meets his need for justice yet restricts his baser desires for disproportionate revenge. The Christian remains a citizen but is required also to turn his heart Heavenwards and see with the eyes of God and respond with His mercy. The *Lex Talionis* that will be uppermost in a Christian's mind will be the "measure for measure" which he prays daily in the Lord's Prayer. *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us"*. Our forgiveness and our forgivingness are bonded together in the divine equation. The unforgiving, as Jesus reminds us in one of his most alarming parables (Mt.18v21-35), fails to reflect the forgiveness

of God in his dealings with others with terrifying consequences. In Christ the sinner does not get what he deserves and we should be grateful beyond words that it is so.

In facing the Cross of Christ the sinner views a terrifying but glorious outworking of the *Lex Talionis*- 'wound for wound, hand for hand, foot for foot, life for life'. It is Christ who recompenses the otherwise unpayable damages of human sinfulness. It is only by his perfect holiness, his infinite goodness, his divinity in fact that the sum total of the squalor and depravity of man's deceitful and unfaithful heart, past, present and to come, can be purged. By his stripes we have been healed (Isaiah 53).

So when Jesus says, *'You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you...'*, He is not abrogating the Law but rather pointing us beyond it to its origin and its end and to our vocation in Christ, the Word of God incarnate. The divine justice is more terrible than the mind of man can endure and yet more merciful than the heart of man can conceive.

Jesus points to the far end of the Law - that men may live in peace with one another and with God, fully reconciled. The path to this is repentance, generosity and forgiveness. It is a hard road and an act of will is required to take it.