

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Sexagesima Sunday
February 19, 2017

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In the Sermon on the Mount Our Lord Jesus puts before us the vision of what we must be. It is the *Divine* vision. It is therefore something we simply must not avoid or ignore. You cannot read this Sermon without being fully aware of the Lord's assumption of *absolute authority*. Ironically there are those who use the Sermon on the Mount to promote a "humanitarian ethic." This "ethic" is accompanied by generous portions of wiggle room and devoid of religious obedience. To protect that ethic, what is left on the cutting room floor are the many times throughout His sermon when Jesus of Nazareth says, "It was said to them of old time....*but I say unto you.*" The Lord was claiming to be the fountain of the moral law. And the Only One Who can do that is the Word of God.

Having established all due reverence for the Sermon on the Mount, it is important to remember what happened *after* Jesus preached. What happened next was a brief but concentrated mission of help in Capernaum. In the mission it was revealed that through grace (that is, through the power flowing from Our Lord's Person and Nature) we have the reasonable and holy hope to embrace and embody the Divine vision given in the Sermon on the Mount. If this were not so, the admonition to "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" would lead us to despair. But Our Lord Jesus never asks of us more than we can do. And He provides us with all the tools and material needed to succeed. The determined act of our will, when cooperating with His grace, perfects our nature. Without grace we are dead in the water. "Do not pass GO; do not collect \$200."

In our gospel passage today the focus is on that portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which Our Lord deals with two ideas of the old Mosaic Law. Jesus deepens and crafts the Old Covenant until it reaches His standard. The first of these ideas is the old law of *revenge*. To its credit the old law had taken a great step forward in the direction of restraint and proportion. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" means "let the punishment fit the crime." But under the terms of the New Covenant of Christ getting punched in the mouth is the opportunity to show superiority over outrage and revenge. It is *after* the instinct for revenge is subdued we are able to take any necessary steps to protect the moral order and prevent

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injustice. Those steps may include punishment for offense. But it is never a matter of “getting even.” Take my word for it. I have looked! It is not there!

The second idea of the old law Our Lord considers is the *general treatment of enemies*. Why does Almighty God redeem us? Because He treats us not as we are but as we are capable of becoming. And God Incarnate requires us to act as He did. In the Sermon Christ says, “But I say to you not to resist evil, but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other, and if a man will contend with thee in judgment and take away thy coat, let go of thy cloak also, and whosoever will force thee one mile, go with him other two.”

And that is what happened on Good Friday! The good and gracious Saviour was struck on the cheek; His clothes were taken from Him, and he was forced to carry His Cross to Calvary. No wonder Blessed Jesus is called “the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Way we should go.” God Incarnate teaches us, *and then He showed us*.

Whenever our unconverted hearts are quick to resist an injustice, let us think about the Lord of Glory slapped on the face in the high priest’s judgment hall. Let us think about naked Jesus praying for the soldiers gambling over His clothes (which had probably been made for Him by His holy mother). And when any one, friend or foe, makes unreasonable or tiresome demands on our time and energy, let us remember Our Lord with His Cross on the road to Calvary.

When we do that, the Sermon on the Mount becomes less a lofty vision of what we must be. It begins to be a little less remote and impossible, and a little more like marching orders we have accepted and for which we have been equipped to follow Jesus along the Way that leads to Life.