

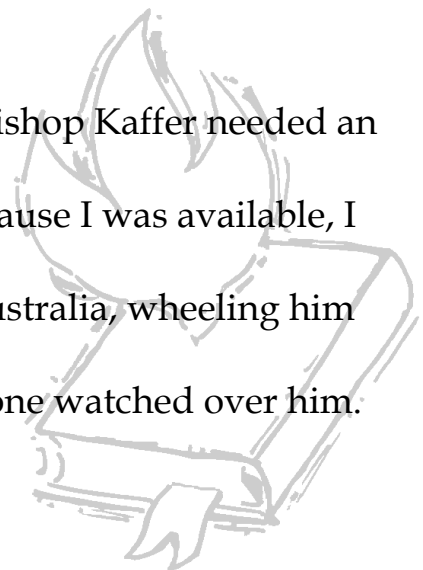
Homily
7th Sunday OT - A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
February 22-23, 2020

Lv 19: 1-2, 17-18
Ps 103: 1-2; 3-4; 8; 10; 12-13
1 Cor 3: 16-23
Mt 5: 38-48

Back in 2008, I had an opportunity to travel with about 150 teenagers from the Diocese of Joliet to Sydney, Australia, as part of Pope Benedict's *World Youth Day* celebration that particular year. In addition to serving as a chaplain on the trip, part of my responsibilities during that time ended up being my service to one Bishop Roger Kaffer (the former auxiliary bishop of the diocese), who, sadly to say, passed away shortly after his return from this trip. Little did he or I know that his journey to Australia would serve as his last major function as a bishop, but the experience he encountered during those two weeks was one for the books.

Because of his declining health at the time, Bishop Kaffer needed an escort throughout this two-week excursion. Because I was available, I ended up serving as his "escort" throughout Australia, wheeling him from place to place and making sure that someone watched over him.



This responsibility was not so bad for me, since I got to sample some of the perks that the bishops experience within their respective ministry.

My conclusion at the end of the trip was that I enjoyed the perks that the bishops received but would not want to take on what the bishops must go through in order to receive those perks.

My service as an escort almost began in disaster, though. As I took it upon myself to get poor Bishop Kaffer through customs in his wheelchair, I also had to figure out how to travel with him and four suitcases at the same time (two of the suitcases were his and two were mine). During a layover in Auckland, New Zealand, I remember coming out of an elevator with the bishop in tow, rolling him out of the elevator while trying to negotiate the luggage. As I recall, I turned away from the bishop if but a moment to collect our personal items when I came to two realizations instantaneously: 1) I didn't set the parking brake on the bishop's wheelchair and 2) I placed the wheelchair on an incline. Not even Benny Hill could have captured that moment in real life as I chased after Bishop Kaffer racing down the slope. I could only imagine what

Bishop Sartain had said to me if anything happened to the poor auxiliary while flying down a ramp with his life flashed before his eyes...

During this trip, Bishop Kaffer and I had a chance to visit all the sites that Sydney has to offer (the opera house, the mountains, learning about the aborigine villages, etc.). Best of all, we celebrated a couple services with the Holy Father and had dinner with all the bishops around the world who attended the event. Cardinal George Pell was a wonderful host and I was content that Bishop Kaffer had this one memory to cherish at the end of his life.

The reason for this story and the inspiration for this homily came from one of our adventures while visiting the wonders of the Outback. During our time together, Bishop Kaffer and I travelled with the teens to what was called "An Aborigine Adventure," which was a camp run by some of the native Australians who taught all of us about life in the wilderness of this particular country. Like most cultural experiences, I was quite amazed at all the new lessons I learned about a different

culture foreign to me, especially in regard to the manner in which the natives used a *boomerang*, the subject of today's homily.

To be honest, I never really thought about the uses of what I considered to be a child's toy. After that particular excursion, I bought a boomerang souvenir so that I would remember what I learned in the event that I could use my new found knowledge as a teachable moment (that said, I spent an entire morning in my room trying to find this particular item).

I used to consider the boomerang a toy with which the kids might play - in fact, Bishop Kaffer and I had a boomerang throwing contest while at the aborigine camp; after being taught how to throw this toy, I tossed mine some 15 feet and Bishop Kaffer tomahawked his into the ground. However, I learned that the boomerang was more than just a toy for your typical aborigine - it was a multi-faceted tool used for so many other tasks in their life. When sharpened, the boomerang is used for hunting and for cutting up the day's catch. The boomerang is used as a weapon of defense against those who might attack a local village. And

in reference to today's gospel reading from Matthew, the boomerang is also used to exact justice against a person who wronged another, literally "an eye for an eye."

According to aborigine custom, when a person is found guilty of some type of crime within a village, they are not sent to prison because prisons do not exist within the native villages. Instead, justice is levied by the boomerang according to the severity of the crime. If the crime involved the hand, the hand would be addressed by the boomerang and so on with the other parts of the body. If you check out the internet concerning the punishment levied by the boomerang, the articles you might find would not be fit to read at a family Mass.

In the gospel of Matthew, this type of "eye for an eye" punishment is described by scripture scholars as a *Lex Talionis*, so to speak, or *The Law of Retaliation*. This ancient practice has its origins in the Old Testament Law, as the Torah (or the first five books of the Old Testament) cite the use of this type of punishment at least three times in its writings: (Ex. 21: 23, 24; Lev. 24: 19, 20; and Deut. 19: 21). A similar law is found in the

ancient Mesopotamian code of Hammurabi which replaced financial compensation for bodily injuries with physical injury for physical injury. The Old Testament understanding of the *Lex Talionis* was a person's offense against the covenant community was also an offense against the God of the covenant and would be dealt with in a manner equivalent to the crime.

As we address together this particular section of Matthew's Gospel (which, by the way, we have not covered together at a Sunday Mass since 1996), we listen to the interpretation of this Old Testament laws by the author and living example of the law itself, Jesus Christ. His response to this Old Testament custom is simply to refute it, claiming that a good Christian would never react to violence with violence.

In fact, the good Christian, following Christ's path to salvation, would not injure anyone at all. One of the hardest human tendencies of which we must let go is that of *revenge*. From Old Testament proverbs to Klingon lore, our desire to seek out "an eye for an eye" has resulted in the justification of capital punishment and other acts of hate that some

might justify with the words of the Old Testament or even from the fathers of our own beloved country.

As a continuation of his “Sermon on the Mount” from the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we have read the lesson from three weeks ago on the Beatitudes and the humble manner in which we need to conduct ourselves for the sake of our salvation. We have read the lesson from two weeks ago of how the humble, loving soul is like the salt of the earth and the light of the world when soul’s love flavors the world and sheds the light of God upon all with whom the soul comes in contact.

The gospels from last week and this week continue this discussion on human conduct with what scripture scholars call “A Reinterpretation of the Law” or what I shall call for the sake of this homily “the six challenges.” In these challenges, our Lord cites the human interpretations of the law which come from the era of “an eye for an eye” and reestablishes the Lord’s intended meaning in order to get us back on the right track. Our Lord is removing “the middleman,” so to speak, thus allowing the author of the law to interpret the law directly

for us. To use the Latin vernacular, our Lord wishes changes our understanding of justice from the *Lex Talionis* (*the law of retribution*) to the *Lex Amoris* (*the law of love*).

Notice how, in these six lessons on the Jewish law, half of them refer to the way we love our enemies. Our Lord preaches,

“You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment... (Mt 5: 21-22)

«Ustedes han oído que a sus antepasados se les dijo: “No mates, pues el que mate será condenado.” Pero yo les digo que cualquiera que se enoje con su hermano, será condenado.»

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well... (Mt 5: 38-39)

«Ustedes han oído que se dijo: “Ojo por ojo y diente por diente.” Pero yo les digo: No resistas al que te haga algún mal; al contrario, si alguien te pega en la mejilla derecha, ofrécele también la otra.»

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. (Mt 5: 44-45)

«También han oído que se dijo: “Ama a tu prójimo y odia a tu enemigo.” Pero yo les digo: Amen a sus enemigos, y oren por quienes los persiguen. Así ustedes serán hijos de su Padre que está en el cielo; pues él hace que su sol salga sobre malos y buenos, y manda la lluvia sobre justos e injustos.»

Our Lord redefines the instrument we use to implement justice upon those who have wronged us and the choice is a simple one. To return to our Australian image, is the justice we render upon those who have wronged us in the form of this (the boomerang) or this (the heart)? Does our retribution against evil in this world come in the form of “an eye for an eye” or in the form of “love thy neighbor?” The world of jurisprudence has their rules; the faithful Jewish Christian often lives by a different set of rules.

Look at the image of Christ crucified on the cross, for instance. If our Lord and God applied the same rules that we have interpreted from the Old Testament as a human race, the entire race justifiably should have been eradicated from the earth. As we killed Christ, so Christ had every justifiable reason to kill us. But he didn't - Christ is not a God of

retribution but a God of love. He not only spared our lives but, for the sake of our salvation, he died in order to save us. The King of the Jews sacrificed his life so that the people over which he had authority would be protected from the stain of sin.

If we understand this message, then our response to today's gospel is clear. If Jesus is willing to forgive and is desiring to save the worst of sinners, then he is willing to forgive any of us. In that light, we are taught by our Lord to "love our enemies," especially the worst of enemies, to say that we are willing to forgive them and every other soul whose sinful lives are *less* than them. Christ reconditions us to love everyone and to forgive everyone if we wish to find the path to the kingdom of heaven.

And what happens to the person who learns how to love as opposed to hate and violence? In the world of the boomerang, the person who throws this instrument well is always guaranteed that the boomerang will return to them. In the world of the faithful Christian, the one who loves is guaranteed that love will return thirty, sixty and a hundredfold

as our Lord will continue to instruct us eight chapters from this point in Matthew's gospel (Mt 13: 1-23). The love we offer, the forgiveness we provide and the seeds we plant produce the fruit of God's grace for the next generation and for our own souls as well.

And so, the choice is ours – by which instrument do we wish to use in response to those who do us wrong and to those who love us? The answer we choose will pave the way towards the road in life we choose to walk. May it be a good choice and a holy one that guides us towards the road that leads us to heaven. May we share that road with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.