

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading Leviticus 19: 1–2, 17–18

The Book of Leviticus (rarely read in church) is the third of the five books of the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch or the Torah. It is essentially concerned with Laws and rubrics, and for many centuries was attributed to Moses, since it is clearly influenced by the Ten Commandments. However, scholars nowadays think that it was written by several different authors, all following the tradition of Moses.

Chapter 19 is particularly concerned with holiness – God’s holiness and the people’s holiness – and is sometimes called the ‘Holiness code’.

Whereas Leviticus is often seen as a handbook for the priests of the time, this passage is addressed to the whole community, whose holiness derives from God’s own holiness.

The heart of the Law and the sure way to holiness are both reflected in the famous phrase ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, which Jesus develops in this Sunday’s Gospel.



ST BEUNO'S OUTREACH
IN THE DIOCESE OF WREXHAM

Gospel Matthew 5: 38–48

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth

Jesus continues his ‘Sermon on the Mount’ with two more sayings taken from the Pentateuch. He begins by quoting the oldest law in the world, known in Latin as the *lex talionis*, which has been called ‘the law of tit for tat’. Seen in its historical setting, the *lex talionis* was not a savage law, but one that was meant to limit vengeance. It was in fact a law of mercy. It was intended only as a guide for a judge who had to decide the penalty to be paid as compensation to the injured party. The punishment was never intended to be carried out literally.

The end of retaliation

Jesus teaches with authority, quoting and contradicting the Law several times: see Matthew Ch. 5, vv. 21, 27, 33, and here in vv. 38 and 43.

The characteristic ethics of the Christian life

- *Turn the other cheek*

It is easy to slap someone on the cheek, but if they turn the other one, the only way to hit them with any force is to strike them with the back of your hand. According to Jewish Rabbinic law this action is an even greater insult.

- *Give him your cloak as well.*

The tunic or *chiton*, was a long cotton or linen inner tunic; even the poor would have two. Most Jews, on the other hand, would only have one cloak, a much heavier outer garment worn as a robe by day and a blanket by night. It was Jewish law that a tunic could be taken as a pledge, but a cloak could not, by right, be taken permanently. (Exodus 22: 26–7)

- *Walk the other mile.*

‘And if anyone **orders you** to go one mile...’ the use of the word ‘orders’ here is significant; other translations use ‘**forces you**’.

The original noun *aggareus* is a Persian word meaning courier. If there was a shortage of anything to ensure the delivery of the mail, the citizens could be **forced** to provide it, including delivering it themselves.

- *The call to perfection.*

This has been referred to as ‘the most central and famous section of the Sermon on the Mount’, describing essential Christianity in action. The Greek word for perfect is *teleios*. The Greek idea of perfection is functional: a thing is *teleios* if it achieves the purpose for which it was designed. Jesus clearly outlines how we become perfect in the New Testament sense of the word when we love others as God loves us.