

Two key themes in today's Scripture readings are holiness and love. In every Mass, we celebrate the holiness of God when we sing or recite the Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts. In the second Eucharistic prayer, we continue the same theme when the priest prays, "You are indeed holy, O Lord, the fount of all holiness." God is not only uniquely holy in himself, he is the source of the holiness that we encounter in the sacraments, in the saints and, to some degree, in the whole of created reality.

Today's reading from the book of Leviticus contains two brief excerpts from what is known as the Code of Holiness. It speaks of the call of God's people to holiness and suggests something of what it involves. Its opening line sums up its message. "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

Although the text does not spell out what is meant by the holiness of God, we do know that the holiness to which we are called is a sharing in it. Today's responsorial psalm suggests something of its nature when it says, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

The holiness to which so many texts in the Bible call us has a strong moral quality to it. It is inseparable from the way we treat one another. The first step to pursuing a genuinely holy life, the commandments remind us, is to avoid hurting

others – hurting them physically, psychologically, economically, or in any other way. Do not hate others or take vengeance or hold a grudge, Leviticus says. As difficult as it can be to avoid in every situation doing harm to others, our efforts to do so need to be complemented by thoughts and actions of a more positive nature. Leviticus sums up what that entails in a single sentence, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

When asked on one occasion “what is the greatest commandment” and on another “what must we do to inherit eternal life,” Jesus answered, “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself.” Love and holiness are inseparable.

Today’s gospel, taken from Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, contains two of a series of so-called contrast sayings in which Jesus evokes a commandment of the Mosaic Law or a popular saying at the time and then modifies it. In some cases he intensifies what the traditional law was asking and in others rejects it.

The saying about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was not meant to encourage vengeance but to prevent the vengeance, then taken for granted, from escalating. The phrase “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”

does not appear in the Old Testament. It does, however, suggest an attitude that was and is all too common. It is easy, Jesus says, to love those who love us or to flatter and serve those from whom we hope to have some gain. What Jesus is underlining here is the fact that there should be no limit to love of neighbour. It is to include even those whom we think of as our enemies.

What such love entails is suggested when Jesus says that we should pray for those who persecute us. Luke's version of the saying adds, "do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." It is clear from sayings like these that the love of which Jesus speaks is not a matter of emotions, but an act of the will. It is of a different nature from the kind of feelings we have for family and friends.

Today's gospel echoes the challenge of Leviticus about holiness when it says, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Luke's version of the saying is "Be merciful as your Father is merciful." Later in the Sermon, Jesus cites the Golden Rule. "In everything," he says, "do to others as you would have them do to you." This, he adds, "sums up the moral teaching of the Law and the prophets."

Love, mercy, compassion and the Golden Rule all point to the moral dimension of holiness. As important as that dimension is, however, it needs to be

complemented by a second one, that of grace. It is only through God's gift of the Holy Spirit that holiness becomes possible for us.

The sacramental life of the church and especially the Eucharist are there to remind us of our continuing dependence on the presence to and in us of the risen Christ and of God's Spirit inspiring us to embrace and to put into practice the moral and spiritual ideal that Jesus taught and lived.

Holiness is both a gift and a challenge. Without the gift, we are exposed to falling back into one form or another of selfishness and self-centeredness, the root of all sin.

The document on the Church published by the second Vatican Council includes a chapter entitled "The Universal Call to Holiness." "All Christians," it says, "in whatever state or walk in life are called ... to the perfection of love." Holiness is meant not just for nuns and priests, or for members of lay institutes. It is meant for everyone. The seed of holiness was planted in our heart at baptism. Becoming holy means in a sense becoming the kind of persons we already are.