

### **February 23, 2014 "Ben Hur" Homily**

"Ben Hur" is a film that garnered many awards in 1959. It features the Actor Charlton Heston in the title role. There are many compelling scenes in this lengthy film, but I'd like to single out just two of them.

Featured in the first scene is Ben-Hur, a Jewish prince and a member of a highly respected family in Jerusalem. Ben-Hur is a tortured young man burning with rage and resentment. Among his many grievances are the following: his beloved homeland is occupied by the Romans, a childhood friend has betrayed him, he is convicted of a trumped up crime and is sentenced to hard labor on a ship of slaves, and his mother and sister are condemned to a "living death" in a leper colony. His only desire is to avenge himself on his enemy, the Romans, who have caused so much pain to his people. Also in the scene is the woman he loves, a beautiful young Jewess called Esther. The young woman has recently heard Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and is deeply moved by His words on love and forgiveness.

Esther now realizes that the consequence of refusing to forgive often results in a person becoming increasingly bitter. In addition, she recognizes all men and women are brothers and sisters, all children of the Heavenly Father. She can't help but notice that the man she once admired and loved has become no different from those who caused him so much suffering. His hatred has blinded him to the inspired teachings of Christ. He simply cannot forgive nor can he forget what has befallen him.

In the second scene, Ben-Hur witnesses the death of Jesus on the cross. He is amazed that Christ forgave his executioners from the cross, even though they offered no indication of being repentant. The prayers of Christ on the cross moved him deeply. He later told Esther, "I felt his voice take the sword out of my hands". His hatred finally relinquished, Ben-Hur is free, and his once vengeful heart is now disposed to the teachings of Jesus. He has found peace.

In his Sermon on the Mount, which has had such an enormous influence on many non-Christians, including Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Modern India, Jesus declares: "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).

Let us recall that the first Christian prayer recorded in Sacred scripture is the prayer of forgiveness by St. Stephen, the first martyr. As he was being stoned to death he cried out to heaven, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

In his commentary on Christ's Sermon on the Mount, the biblical scholar George Martin offers these helpful words: "To be children of God means to behave as God behaves, loving God and even doing good for the unlovable". "To love as God loves means loving those who do not return our love."

What is the greatest harm another has done me? How do I respond to that person?  
What are the limits of my love?

Amen