

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

REFLECTION 1:

TWO INSEPERABLE LOVES

The mobile phone in your hand is an almost miraculous device. It takes videos and photos and contains all the information that broadband and the Internet can hold. Moreover, it connects you with anyone anywhere in the world. If mobile phones had been around in Jesus' day, the commandments would have been made available on an app. And the scribe's question might have been: 'which app on your mobile phone is the greatest?' Jesus might have answered, "the big red heart-shaped app. It tells you to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength'".

Although we understand the reply Jesus gave to the scribe, our own experience of love is often otherwise. We love a little or a lot up to a point, unless or if. We love as hard as we can, but our love has limits imposed by our own humanity. Love is by definition, partial.

You might remember the Fiddler on the Roof who asked his wife if she loved him. Golde screams, 'after 25 years of washing and cleaning and feeding and bearing your children, I suppose I do'. And Tevye sighs, 'after 25 years, it's nice to know'. We get a better sense of this by saying that God not only loves us, but he also likes us. It is something like that with us humans. We can love someone without liking them and that is how we love enemies. We wish them well but at a distance from us. But if we like someone as well as love him or her, then that love has a totally different tenor. It is tinged with emotion. We will them well with a passion, we enjoy their good fortune; they become part of our own life. It is the inner essence of a person that we love; it is the exterior idiosyncrasies that we cherish. Frank Sinatra sang, 'the way she wears her hat, the way she sips her tea – they can't take that away from me'.

Each of us is a unique combination of attributes, actions, sin, grace, experience and genes. There is nobody else quite like us: the way we look and act and want and strive and dream. God's affection for us is without rhyme or reason, even irrational. Our prayer is really a conversation with someone who loves us totally and that's a breathtaking reality.

God is so involved with his children, that it is impossible to love them, without also loving him, whether we intend to do it or not. So, these two commandments are really not two, but one supreme law, with two aspects, love God and love your neighbour. It was Jesus who put them together. We offer ourselves to God each Sunday at Mass, there we are gathered to worship God and celebrate his goodness. But it doesn't end after Mass. We carry over that celebration into the rest of the week by loving and caring for all those whom God will send our way. Worship of God and love of God are made real in the love of our neighbour.

REFLECTION 2:

OUR SUPREME LAW – TWO ASPECTS

Even a casual reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus and the Jewish leaders were frequently at loggerheads with one another. So, we are inclined to view these opponents as villains, narrow, bigoted and spiteful. There were however some who share Jesus' convictions, sought his counsel and were even sympathetic to his cause. We meet one of these in today's Gospel (Mk. 12: 28-34). Mark identifies him as a scribe whose role it was to prioritise the most important of a multitude of laws. So, he asked Jesus, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?' Jesus cited two laws in reply – one from the Book of Deuteronomy and the other from the Book of Leviticus (Old Testament). In combination these two extracts said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with your entire being, and your neighbour as yourself'. The scribe was thrilled with the reply and exclaimed, 'Excellent Teacher, you are right'. And in reply Jesus told him that he was not far from the kingdom of God.

The fundamental failing of the scribes and Pharisees was that they tried to love God while excluding people. That's why they fasted, gave away a tenth of their income, were scrupulous about washings and yet, they avoided contact with those whom, in their estimation, they regarded as sinners. Not surprising then, that they turned into proud, selfish people, disdainful of others. What they were trying to do was impossible, because no one can truly love God without also loving people. The opposite of course is also true. It is impossible to truly love people without also loving God.

Jesus spoke about this in his parable of the Judgement. He talked about a group of people who had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick. They didn't think they were doing anything really religious. They were simply meeting human needs. Remember how Jesus addressed these people? He said to them, 'as often as you did this to one of my least brothers and sisters, you did it to me'.

God is so involved with his children, that it is impossible to love them, without also loving him, whether we intend to do it or not. So these two commandments are really not two, but one supreme law, with two aspects, love God, love our neighbour. It was Jesus who put them together, because they belong together! We cannot love God without loving people...and we cannot love people without loving God. It's as simple as that.