

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 4:1-2.6-8 / Mark 7:1-8.14-15.21-23)
02.09.2018

Dear brothers and sisters,

Each one of our Sunday Eucharistic celebrations is structured in the same way: a first reading from the Old Testament chosen in relation to the gospel passage which will follow, inviting us to read both readings together, each one enlightening the other. There is an exception for Eastertide Sundays where the first reading is always from the Acts of the Apostles.

Today, one of the common themes of our two readings is the gift of God's Law to his people. In the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, we see Moses giving to Israel the laws and customs they are to follow.

We know that there were 613 commandments in the Law given by Moses to his people. It is interesting to note that in St Matthew's gospel we read how in response to the question: "Which is the greatest commandment of the Law? Jesus said: You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself". And Jesus adds: "On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets too". (Mt 22, 34-40). So there are 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, but all these 613 commandments are just different expressions of the two main commandments: to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbour. We read 'To love' our neighbour. The verb "to love" is ambiguous. To love our neighbour means to respect them, serve them, help them grow and show them compassion. None of the 611 other commandments contradict these two commandments.

We have here a precious tool of discernment. We should never invoke the authority of the Sacred Scriptures or of the tradition of the Church to present a judgment which contradicts the two great commandments. Compassion, respect and love should always prevail over harsh judgment and hardness of heart. Truth and love should never be separated. Let us take an example. If we are "pro life" but are ready "to kill" at least in words or in our heart those who don't think like us, there is something wrong with us: we have to love all our neighbours, not only some of them, not only those who think like us. We can disagree with someone, but we must do so with love and respect. The gospel way is an exacting way, sometimes a crucifying one, but it is the way to life, to life according to God's heart.

When Moses gave the Laws and customs to Israel, he added: "You must add nothing to what I command you and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God just as I lay them down for you".

In Jesus' day many problems had arisen because the Pharisees and Scribes had added a host of human regulations and external observances to the commandments of God: washing of hands, washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes, etc. Jesus opposed them strongly: "These people honour me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me". "You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions". Above the main altar of the Basilica in

Assisi, we read: “Si cor non orat, in vanum lingua laborat”, if the heart is not praying, the tongue labours in vain. What is true for prayer is true also for our way of living.

The Lord invites us not to focus on external observances or human regulations, not to try to save ourselves in an easy and finally deceptive way by our own actions, even our good actions, but to come back to our heart and to welcome our salvation as a grace, as a gift from God.

To come back to our heart: Our heart is the inner core of our being, the place where we meet with the Lord in prayer, the place where we learn how to love our neighbour in truth, that is to say, respecting, serving and helping them grow. The heart is the place where we make our decisions, and the place from which we exercise our liberty. Our heart is the place where we seek God and look at him, and where we discover that it is God who first seeks us and looks at us.

We have to ask the Lord in prayer for the grace of a pure heart, a heart from which we shall be able to make the right choices: those which please God and help our neighbour grow. To obtain a pure heart, prayer is necessary but not enough. We also have a part to play. We have to keep vigil at the door of our heart, preventing evil things from entering therein which would inspire evil actions in us. An evil action does not please God and does not help our neighbour grow. Today’s gospel passage lists such things: “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly”. With such things, we are far from respect, service, justice, mercy and compassion, which should emanate from our hearts and regulate our actions towards our neighbour.

May love for God and our neighbour be deeply rooted within our hearts and inspire all our judgments and actions!