

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Exodus 22:20-26 / Matthew 22:34-40)
29.10.2017

The Pharisees – through one of their number – asked Jesus a question: *Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?*

Note how Jesus answers His questioner. *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. On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets also.*

Jesus does not cite one commandment alone, but two.

Moreover, He says that on these commandments hangs not only the Law, but the teaching of the Prophets also hangs on them.

Clearly, by the answer He gives Jesus seeks to widen His interrogator's perspective.

We might ask, what does Jesus mean when He says that the second commandment *resembles* the first?

We could think of the two commandments *resembling* each other – as equalling each other – in terms of importance. This is not entirely false, I'm sure.

I think, however, we can also consider the two commandments *resembling* each other in another way and that is that they are both saying the same thing in two different forms. In this sense what Jesus does is promulgate one great commandment which expresses in two different ways exactly the same thing, seeing it from two different angles. I suggest that the point we are being called to grasp from Jesus' statement is that God and humanity cannot be separated. *Created in the image and likeness of God* humanity resembles God. To love God requires of us that we love all human beings made in His image and likeness and our love of those made in the image and likeness of God implies loving Him.

It could be argued that this notion of one great commandment – comprising love of God and love of neighbour – is a thought that runs throughout the Bible.

It is certainly made very clear for us in one particular book of the New Testament which immediately came to my mind when I read together the two Scripture readings proposed for our meditation at this morning's Eucharist. I refer to the First Letter of St John. I found my thoughts turning without hesitation to this epistle with its insistence upon love of God being made manifest in love of neighbour and love of neighbour bearing testimony to one's love for God.

There is a passage in 1 John 4: 20–21 that could hardly be any clearer in this regard. It reads: *If anyone says I love God, but fails to love and keeps on hating a fellow human being, that person is a liar; for those who do not love their neighbour – someone who is right there in front of them – how can they love God whom they have never seen? It is God Himself who has said it: one must love not only God, but one's neighbour.*

The Last Judgement scene in Matthew's gospel makes exactly the same point, does it not? In Matthew 25 where Jesus speaks of how those called to judgement will be assessed, He makes it clear that they will be judged on how they treated their neighbours, caring for them or not, and that this will be the measuring line when it comes to whether or not they have honoured the Lord their God by their lives. Note the words Jesus puts upon the lips of God the Just Judge: *What you did or what you failed to do for the least of these who are mine, it was in my regard that you acted or failed to act.*

The love of which the commandments speak and upon which Jesus insists so strongly in His teaching is much more than a warm feeling fluttering in the heart of a lover who is emotionally connected to their loved one. It is more than just a feel-good sentiment.

The love of which the commandments speak is love to be shown in act. (This is apparent in today's first reading from the Book of Exodus.)

Once again Matthew 25 is also enlightening in this respect.

It is surely worth noting that those who have loved in the Last Judgement scene (in Matthew 25) are depicted as having ignored their acts of love. In other words, their acts of love were not about themselves, their feelings, their sentiments; those who acted didn't feel flutters in their hearts. The love they showed in act was experienced by those on the receiving end and it was experienced as nothing other than a reflection of God's goodness emanating from the people who posed the acts of charity they carried out.

It is important to understand that love is more than just an amicable feeling. It is an attitude of the heart to be held and displayed in regard not only to friends, but also in regard to those unknown to us and more than that vis-a-vis people we have no amicable sentiments for or they for us.

Even more than that, Jesus insists, does He not, that we are to love our enemies?

Clearly, Christian love is not to be centred solely on amicable feelings!

When the Pharisee asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment he may well have expected Jesus to take one of the commandments in the Decalogue and proffer it as His answer to the question put to Him.

It is interesting to note that Jesus did not go in that direction.

It is interesting that Jesus did not refer to the lists found in either Deuteronomy 6 or Leviticus 19.

What explains the option Jesus took?

I would like to make what I consider to be an important point here.

Just think of how the lists of the Decalogue frame the commandments. They do so, if not solely, certainly by and large in negative terms. The words: *Thou shalt not...* are a constant refrain.

In the response Jesus offered to the Pharisees who questioned Him – men who were evidently holding negative thoughts in His regard – Jesus chose to respond in a positive way. This was always Jesus' stance when confronted with negativity.

Christ's words are very definitely positive words: ***You shall love.*** For Jesus *the Law* is positive; for Him *the Law* is the revelation of God's love; it is God's gift to safeguard love. Whoever speaks in terms of love speaks in terms of life.

Jesus' words are positively life-giving words. This is what love is: positively life-giving. This is who and what God is: *the Lord and giver of life* who has loved each one of us into being and whose constant love sustains and supports our lives.

The way Jesus frames the Law makes it more positively attractive than do any negative injunctions.

The point Christ makes in His teaching is that the Law comes from love – that is God. For, *God is love.* (We find that little phrase in 1 John.)

The Law sends us in the direction of life with God – that is life in love.

I said earlier that Jesus sought to widen the horizon of his interrogator. The Pharisee asked what was *the greatest commandment in the Law*, Christ answered in regard to *the greatest commandment in both the Law and the Prophets*. We can understand this addition of the Prophets as Jesus responding in terms of the whole of the Scriptures' teaching.

Clearly, **Jesus sees love everywhere in God's revelation.**

Is Christ's response not an invitation addressed to all of us – a reminder to us that we need to enter into this same vision?

We are being called by today's gospel to enter into Jesus' vision of things, to adopt and make our own, His spiritual insight: to open ourselves up to Christ' width and depth of vision that sees love everywhere in the Bible...everywhere in life!

Yes, the whole of the Sacred Scriptures reveal God and His great commandment to love.

They reveal to us what it is that makes us resemble God Himself: love.

The love we are called to exhibit is nothing other than a reflection of God's own life and love at work within us.

When love is made manifest in and through us, this is nothing less than the trace of God's own life and love at work within us.

Finally, the Great commandment would have us *love others as God loves us.*

Let us never forget that God loves us even with what is difficult to love in us.