

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Exodus 22:20-26 / Matthew 22:34-40)  
25.10.2020

When we love others we want them to be free; we don't see them as belonging to us, but we do see ourselves belonging to them. This is because it is in the nature of love to give itself. Anyone who loves another will therefore want to give their whole self to their loved one. We recall Jesus' words in John's Gospel: *A person can have no greater love than this, to give their life for their loved one.*

In today's Gospel passage Jesus sums up the whole of the Law – its 600+ prescriptions – in just two commandments, which both make the same one basic point: that we are called to embody total self-giving love in all our relationships – our relationship with God and our relationships with others.

It is clear that for Jesus love is the very essence of the Law.

For Christ for someone to live according to the Law implies that this person be committed to living their life altruistically. That is surely what today's first reading has to say to us with the emphasis it places upon the display of generous mercy in regard to those in need of our kind favour.

Both of today's Scripture readings invite us to be on our guard against an attitude which stands in blatant contradiction with the Law of love... and that is the attitude of self-centredness.

Self-centredness is a great temptation for all of us. Our wounded humanity has a tendency to constantly fall back upon itself. As a result, self-centredness is inclined to mar our relationships.

When any relationship in our life is lived primarily from the perspective of *what is in this for me?*, it is to be questioned if it is a love relationship. True love for another is not self-seeking, it is concerned for the other before oneself. It puts the other first.

Bearing this in mind, let us set about reading the Scripture texts proposed for our meditation this morning. We read these texts in a bid to understand what the Lord wants to say to help us in our daily lives. It is our well-being as His children that the Lord has in mind when He insists upon us giving obedience to His Great Commandment, the law of love.

In Jesus' response to the question put to Him – *What is the greatest commandment?* – the first thing we should note is the positivity in His message. There is something very positive about the words of Scripture He cites as containing the *two* commandments He refers to as the *one* which is greatest! In passing, let me remark how in speaking of *two commandments* Jesus points to a third element contained within them: a truly adjusted love of oneself. Listen to Jesus' words: *The greatest commandment is the love of God and of our neighbour as ourself.* For Jesus the two separate commandments cited amount to one and the same. In fact, as I've just hinted, what we have in Jesus' response is one three-tiered commandment... with each element to it being *the same*.

What did Jesus mean by what He called *the same*?

Did He mean the commandments He recited were *the same* in the sense of being of equal importance one to another? That would lead us to understand that each love – love of God,

love of others and love of oneself – are all as *great* as one another. In a sense this is what Jesus meant by *the same*.

But might I suggest that perhaps what Jesus meant by *the same* is to be understood simply in the most literal of ways? By that I mean that the two commandments Jesus mentioned are the same because they say the same thing under two different forms.

They are not just *the same* in that they resemble one another, but they are *the same* in that God and others constitute one and the same reality!

This is based no doubt upon that vision of humanity as resembling God as it is presented to us in the Book of Genesis where humans are said to have been made in God's own image and likeness.

Such an understanding of the *two commandments* – the love of God and of neighbour as oneself – as *One Great Commandment* is substantiated by several New Testament texts which make the point that you simply cannot have one without the other.

The Johannine Letters are striking from this point of view. I think of what we read in 1 John 4:20-21: *Those who say 'I love God', and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.* There we see that the love we have for others is love for God and how our love for God expresses itself in love for our neighbour. It is not just that one leads to the other. The two are inseparable! We could say, one is the other! It is in this sense – in the strongest possible way – that the two commandments are *the same*. There is no love for God that isn't expressed in love for others.

The teaching of Jesus in the Last Judgement scene in Matthew 25 makes exactly this point, does it not? It makes the same point looking at things from another perspective: the love of God being expressed in love for humanity. Therein we read: *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.* Or, seen from the other side: *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did not do it to me.*

If we follow through on the logic of Matthew 25, many good non-religious people will have fulfilled the law of the love of God by their love for others, without ever realising that the good they have done to others – the kindness, mercy and compassion they have shown to those in need – was, in fact, manifested to the Lord Himself, displayed to the person of Christ who lives and awaits our recognition in all those in any kind of need. This suggests that many good people of benevolent social action will have acted in godly ways, even without professing explicit belief in God, while perhaps some people who would claim to be believers, living lives committed to the love of God, will have fallen short of loving the Lord their God by their failure to show kindness to the needy around them who were longing for their consideration.

Talking of things that are striking in Jesus' response to those who asked Him what was the greatest commandment in the Law, I would like to come back to something I said earlier, which I believe is certainly worth flagging up and noting – and that is the positivity of Jesus' response. I can't emphasise enough how Jesus makes a very important contribution to our understanding of the Law by framing it positively.

When most of us think of the Law we think in terms of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. In other words, we actually think mainly in negative terms: *Don't do this or that... Do not worship a graven image, Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not bear false... Or, You shall not do this or that: You shall not steal, You shall not take the Lord's name in vain...*

The commandments of the Decalogue impose interdictions: *Do not* or *You shall not*

In contrast to this negative approach, Jesus' sums up and resumes the Law, framing things in a very positive manner: *You shall ... You shall love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself.*

It is striking that the two very positive commandments – or the three-tiered one Great Commandment – that Jesus gives to us in today's Gospel passage, is not *a word* that figure in the *Ten Great Words* of the Decalogue.

We could claim then that Jesus resumes the Law without starting from *The Ten Words* or *The Ten Commandments*.

Is that not somewhat surprising?

Where did Jesus find the two commandments He claims resume the whole of the Law? He found these commandments in two different places in the Bible: one in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the other in Leviticus 19:18.

What this says to us is that the heart and soul of the Law – what actually inspires and animates the Law – comes from outside the tight framework of the Law, if I can put it that way.

That is a bit like saying that the essence of good chauffeuring, the art of good driving skill, is to be found elsewhere than in the memorisation of all the articles of the Highway Code. A person can know the Highway Code and not be able to steer a car!

Let me give another example.

Is it not also true that there are many cases where the real meaning of something said is not in the literal sense of the words employed? Think of the kind of appellations people attribute to their loved ones to express their affection. Expressions such as *pet* or *sugar pie* or *honey bunch* are not to be taken literally.

The rather silly examples I have just given make a very important point. It is that there is a deeper meaning to words used than just the words themselves. What matters is the essence of what is said; the spirit in which things are said; the core message the words seek to convey.

Apply that to the precepts of the Law and the invitation addressed to us to live all the Legal Precepts of the Torah resumed in just one commandment: the commandment to love.

The point is this: all the negative statements of the Law convey what is essentially a very positive message. The Law's very positive message is that we are called to live in love: to have a wholehearted for God and a wholehearted love for others... a love ready to honour the Lord and honour others... a love ready to respect the Lord in others and respect others in the Lord.

The love to which the Law calls us and wants to leads us to display in our whole way of being is, as I said at the outset of this refection, self-giving love. It is, moreover, a love which is rooted in and is always ready to recognise one's own and everybody else's true identity and

dignity: our fundamental identity and dignity as the children of God, made in the image and likeness of our loving Father.

The Sacred Scriptures assure us that love makes us resemble God, it makes us the same as God, for *God is love*. Our living in love reveals that God lives in us and we live in Him. St John states clearly: *It is in this way that we manifest that God lives in us... by our love for one another*.

The Law properly understood, with all its negative commands – its *Do not*s and *You shall not*s – is a very positive expression of love!

The Law adhered to properly brings the Lord Himself to life within us, because Christ Jesus is, in His person, *the fulfilment of the whole of the Law and the Prophets*.

May our reading of the Sacred Scriptures on this Sunday bring love to life within us.

May it make *Christ live in our hearts*.

May it make us live our lives *in Christ*.

Amen!