

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Deuteronomy 6:2-6 / Mark 12:28-34)
03.11.2024
Shema Israel

Dear brothers and sisters,

“Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart”. This is the well-known Jewish prayer, named after its first two Hebrew words “Shema, Israel”, “Listen, Israel”. Practising Jews pray this prayer at least twice a day. The Virgin Mary and her Son Jesus prayed the “Shema Israel”. Religious Jews in Israel and everywhere in the world still recite this prayer today, as their ancestors faithfully did throughout the centuries. This prayer, which we heard in our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, is quoted verbatim by Jesus in today’s gospel passage as an introduction to the first of all the commandments: “Listen, Israel, the Lord your God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart...”. I propose that we meditate upon this prayer this morning.

The first word “Listen” implies that I am not alone; that there is someone other than myself: someone to whom I have to listen to and with whom I have to speak. In biblical thought, the spiritual life is not a monologue, a self-centred experience, something to do only with ‘I, me and myself’: Far from it! In biblical thought, the spiritual life is ‘a dialogue between me and the one who created me’. My Creator wants to tell me that He loves me and that I am precious to his eyes. He invites me to love him in return. The spiritual life is about living an on-going conversation. It is about being in relationship with my Creator and Saviour God.

“Listen, Israel”. God is in conversation with a people, his people Israel, and the Church, the new Israel of God. God is in conversation with his people with whom he made a covenant of love, and consequently with each one of us personally as members of his people. The spiritual life is not about a relationship between God and each one of us as individuals, but about God and each one of us as members of his people. If we want to be in relationship with the true God we have to belong to a community of believers. The spiritual life is a life of relationship, not between two persons, God and me, but between God and me as a member of a Christian community. I cannot be a Christian alone. We listen to God not only through his Word, the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, but also through the Church, that is to say through its members, its sacraments and its teaching. God speaks to us through our brothers and sisters in humanity who were created in his image. God speaks to us through the beauty of His creation. God speaks to us in multifaceted ways. We listen to Him. We respond to Him, we speak with Him when we pray.

The Lord our God is the one Lord. This is an affirmation of the monotheistic faith of Israel – there is one God – and of the monotheistic faith of Christians who believe in one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe in one God, the God of Israel revealed in Christ Jesus. Nevertheless, if we are honest, we have to humbly acknowledge that we worship a lot of idols besides. We worship what we have, our possessions, or what we dream and desire of acquiring. We worship the work of our hands, all that we have accomplished, even our high academic grades. We worship others when we want to imitate them, forgetting that the whole

point is to be ourselves and not to be a clone of anyone else. And above all, it happens that we worship ourselves. How readily we imagine that we are god! So often we operate on the principle: My way or no way! We think we know better than others that our way of doing things is the right way, that our project is the right path! So often, our prayer is 'Lord, my will be done' instead of being 'Lord, may your will be done'. We can think of ourselves as our own saviour instead of welcoming our salvation from God. The Christian way would be to reject all our idols and to turn all our attention to the true and unique Lord. God is God. We are not God! That is easy to say, but it is more difficult to put into practice!

“Let these words be written on your heart!” May these words be kept in, engraved on, printed in our heart! Our heart is the centre of our being, the place within us wherein God dwells, and from whence springs our prayer. Our heart is that place deep within us wherein we deliberate and take our decisions, the place from whence comes forth either love or hate, the place from whence we encounter people in truth. We need to always remember and never forget the words of this prayer in the depth of our heart. “Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord”.

In the gospel passage we have heard this morning, the prayer of – the Shema Israel – introduces the great commandment given to us by Jesus and which contains all the other requirements of God’s Law: to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This great commandment is a reminder to us that we walk toward a judgement and that we shall be judged not on our human achievements but on the quality of our love: The questions asked of us will be: Have you loved, respected, revered, served God and your neighbour? Have you respected yourself? Have you helped others to become who they are? Or have you ignored, or used and even abused others? To love God, to love our neighbour and to love ourselves – this great commandment with its three facets – is at the heart of our spiritual life.

Let us conclude where we started: Listen! ‘Listen’ is the first step of the synodal process in which the Church has become irrevocably engaged! ‘Listen’ is the first word of the Rule of St Benedict! To listen is not a small matter! Let us listen courageously! Let us listen courageously together! “Listen, Israel”! Let us listen in order to love God, our neighbour and ourselves.