

30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

Exodus 22:20-26

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

Matthew 22:34-40

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, in the Gospel this weekend, the Pharisees now come forward to engage Jesus in a controversy concerning the greatest commandment. The rabbis of the day often tried to summarize the 613 laws of Judaism into one single commandment. A lawyer from among the Pharisees speaks on their behalf and asks Jesus, "Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" Even though the question was designed to trigger an argument, it was a real question back then. In Judaism at that time, there was a debate about the one law around which the best resolve.

By rabbinical count, the 'Law' consisted of some 613 commandments, discussed among the rabbis. Jesus was asked to name one, but responded by naming the two. Jesus quotes from two Old Testament books for his answer. He tells them they must love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind from the book Deuteronomy 6:5, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and your might," and they must love their neighbour as themselves from the book Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbour as yourself." The answer given by Jesus is not new. What is new that Jesus brought the two commandments together and made them of equal importance, thus emphasising their essential relatedness. No rabbi had previously done this. Hence, we must not separate them.

"Love for God and love for neighbour." Incidentally, both are found in the Old Testament: the first in Deuteronomy 6:5, the second in Leviticus 19:18. We've heard these words of Jesus multiple times. However, in this Gospel Jesus brought the two commandments together and made them of equal importance, thus emphasising their essential relatedness. It is the first time someone has linked the two laws of love together. Love of neighbour is now seen in a different light as it is joined with the command concerning love of God. No rabbi had previously done this. Hence, we must not separate them.

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are: "You must love the Lord your God... and you must love your neighbour as yourself." Here, Jesus is describing the two legs of a healthy Christian life. Some people try to get by with

one leg. They love God but not their neighbour. They want a private, personal spirituality, independent of the world. Jesus calls us to be part of a community of faith, a Church, to extend His compassion to others and to be instruments of His peace. A private spirituality, isolated from the world, is foreign to the Gospel which says, "You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world, you are leaven... What you did to the least of these, you did for Me."

Others do the opposite. They might love their neighbour, but "I'm a good person, I don't steal, I don't hurt anyone. I try to help my neighbour." As Christians, we are called to a living relationship with Jesus Christ. We are called to experience communion of life with the Trinity, a supernatural level of living.

Each of these has a life of its own. At first, we may have identified our love for God with emotions of devotion, easy inspirations, and then, one day, these disappear. They are harder to come by as we go through what has been called a "dark night of the soul." Later we see this as a grace that enables our love for God to mature. If we stay faithful through that dark night, our love for God becomes less dependent on our emotions, less demanding of God and more peaceful, more trusting. We learn surrender which is always a sign of spiritual maturity rather than trying to manipulate God as children do with parents.

The same thing happens with our love for our neighbour. At first our notion of love for others is very sentimental and romantic. Then, we encounter ingratitude, manipulation, indifference, hostility and deception. We experience the dark night of Christian charity. Again, if we stay faithful, our love of neighbour matures. We come to see that Christian charity may require candor and honesty, enabling people to become more than they are. Love of God and love of neighbour are the two legs of our Christian life and we need them both.

Our love for God is shown in a relationship of worship and prayer. In the Catholic Church, we have very concrete criteria of how we show love for God in our prayer and worship as a Church. Fidelity to our Sunday obligation and daily prayer are the thermometers of our love for God. These specific requirements of the Church are reliable measures of our love for God and they prevent us from deceiving ourselves when someone might claim to love God and yet never pray.

If our spiritual life is weak, maybe one of these two legs is being neglected if our prayer life seems flat, then maybe we need to look at extending ourselves more generously to others. If our working with others is unfocused or draining, then we need to strengthen our prayer life. Through both of them, our discipleship of Jesus

becomes whole and entire. Through both of them, love of God and love of neighbour, we receive grace and mission. The love of God gives us grace; love of neighbour gives us mission. Love of God and love of neighbour are the two legs of a healthy, powerful, vigorous Christian life.

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are: “You must love the Lord your God... and you must love your neighbour as yourself.” Undoubtedly, it is the second commandment that causes us most trouble. Notice that Jesus says, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.” Only when we love ourselves, will we be able to love other people as the Lord commanded. Unless we love ourselves we cannot love others properly. There is an idea that love of self is wrong, even sinful. There is a form of self-love which is wrong. We call it selfishness or egoism. But there is a form of self-love which is healthy and good.

In reality, we can't offer warmth to others if our own fireplace is cold. We can only love with the amount of love that is in us. Whether we are conscious of it or not. We do love others precisely as we love ourselves. It's very important, then to have a healthy love and respect for ourselves. This is where love starts, but of course it is not meant to end there. All true love of self overflows in the form of love of others and of God.

“You must love the Lord your God... and you must love your neighbour as yourself.” Through this message, Jesus showed us how to live the total Gospel, that is, how to love God and to love our neighbour as well. He didn't say they were the same thing, but that we can't have one without the other. We can see then why the emphasis on love became for Christians the identifying characteristic of their religion.

Dear sisters and brothers, “Love of God and love of neighbour” are the two legs of our Christian life and we need them both. To love God and to love one another. This message of the Lord Jesus is very clear: to live is to strive to love! If we want to be faithful to the God who created us, then we must love all others. We know that in the tradition, it is easy to love those who love us. Jesus calls us to love everyone and that proof of that love is the special love that we must have for our enemies and those who try to destroy us.

We are invited this week to live more profoundly the love given to us in Christ Jesus. We are invited to show that love for all people and especially for those who are our enemies in any way. The promise for us, the Covenant, is that we shall possess everlasting life and be with the Lord forever. Amen.

