

29 October 2017 (30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Exodus 22:20-26; Psalm 17(18):2-4,47,51; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22: 34-40.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

The Old Testament Law is made up of over 600 different rules and regulations; are they all equally important, or is there one that is more important than the rest? This is the question that is being asked to test Jesus; it was a question that was discussed by many great contemporary teachers of the Law.

Jesus tells his listeners that there was one commandment that was above all the rest: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is part of the prayer, called The Shema Yisrael, the devoted Jew prayed a number of times every day. God needs to be at the very centre of all our life, after all we are created in God's own image and likeness, and we can only achieve our fulfilment in life when we build our whole life around God.

The problem arises when at times we let other aspects of our life take over and become our god. These other aspects may be good in themselves, like love and respect for our family, our country, our work, or any other created thing. Jesus reminds us that the true order of our life should be for us to worship and love God with our whole being, every moment of our life, the rest comes automatically, as a consequence of our deep love of God.

Jesus does not stop with the first commandment, as he had been asked, but immediately moves on to the second, which, he declares, is just as important: love your neighbour as yourself. In fact this is a consequence of the first commandment and not a separate one. If I truly love God with my whole being, if every thing I do is influenced by my deep love and respect for God, then I will love what God loves, and I will do nothing to hurt or offend those whom God loves.

All that exists is created, and therefore willed and loved by God. There is nothing that exists that is not in God's love and therefore I need to extend my love to all my sisters and brothers and indeed all of God's creation.

While it may be easy to say that I love God, it is much more difficult to prove this. I may think that in order to love God I need to spend long hours of prayer and perhaps even fasting and sacrifice. These are good for my spiritual life and my relationship with God, but my love of God needs to go much deeper than that and the requirement to love my neighbour as myself tests my real love of God.

We know that we are human, and that therefore perfection is not one of our gifts. As much as we try to be good to all our sisters and brothers we often fail because we often rub each other on the wrong side. Here is where our commitment to love God with our whole being comes into play: how can I love my brother or sister who has hurt me? I need to constantly remind myself that my sister and brother are also loved by God, just as I am; they too are weak and sinners, just as I am. My duty is to extend to them my love and respect as I would to God himself. At times I may need to put myself aside and let the God that is within me reach out and love the God that is within my sister or brother that I cannot really talk to.

Prayer is a very useful tool in moments when I find it difficult to love, but prayer must also be accompanied by respect; if I find it difficult to love my neighbour, at least I need to offer my neighbour respect. Jesus did not say that his way is easy, but he did say that we need to love God with our whole being.

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