

HOMILY SUNDAY 31 – B (Homily 02)\*  
“The Primacy of Love”  
(Dt 6:2-6; Psalm 18; Heb 7:23-28; Mk 12:28-34)

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What is the greatest commandment of all?

Today, we are reminded to put love first in our lives, by loving God, others and ourselves.

The first reading from Deuteronomy holds a wealth of teaching. We are told that Moses, the great lawgiver, is the one who was given the basic commandment of the whole bible, to love God with our whole being. This is the only explicit command to love God in the Old Testament and focuses on the quality of Israel’s relationship with God.

This commandment is meant to be observed and passed on from generation to generation. The benefits of living this commandment will be long life, wellness, prosperity and posterity. Though it does not deny the existence of other gods, it teaches a monotheism that became part of the great schema, or law to be memorized and recited daily by the Hebrews. The response to this great commandment is faithfulness to the covenant, absolute obedience and loyalty to God and love for God as a response to God’s love. This reading provides a very fitting background for the gospel that was proclaimed today.

The sad reality, in the light of this gospel, is that the Hebrew people never lived up to the covenant that God graciously had established with them through the Law, the Temple and the Promised Land. They always succumbed to the age-old triple temptations of obtaining prosperity, posterity and power their own way. By the time of Jesus, they had remade the covenant that was to transform them into the People of God, into a religious system that had recast God in their own image.

It was these religious leaders and this hypocritical religious system that Jesus came to confront and to renew. What is interesting in the gospel of Mark today is that the scribe, whose livelihood depended on that religious system, surprisingly stands out from all the rest in his response to Jesus’ answer to his question – what is the greatest law?

Jesus quotes the first reading from Deuteronomy in answering that question, reminding his hearers of that basic foundational law of the Old Testament, to love God with our whole being. Then he delves deep within the intricate myriad of other laws and elevates to the same status of the Great Commandment, an obscure law from Leviticus 19:18, which states that we are to love others as we love ourselves. That sentence in Leviticus climaxes a series of prohibitions against exploiting and oppressing the poor. Jesus uses this particular sentence to forge a new, deeper, compassionate and more challenging law – the law of the new covenant, a law which summarizes the whole of the bible.

The scribe, astoundingly, “gets it” – he is able to grasp the key message that Jesus is pointing out in the way he handles the question put to him by that scribe. The scribe admits that love of God and love of neighbour is more important than the elaborate sacrifices at the Temple, from which he draws his living. He does not resign his position, nor does Jesus invite him into his movement, but in the interchange with him, Jesus has outmanoeuvred all segments of the Temple establishment in the series of attacks and counterattacks against him. He confounds the religious rulers and authorities who selfishly benefit the most from the unjust religious system they created for themselves out of the gifts that God had given to them for the benefit of all.

This teaching that the love of God and love of neighbor takes precedence over the sacrificial cult echoes prophetic complaints against those who pay careful attention to ritual while ignoring justice. Here Mark acknowledges that the Christian community can fulfill the will of God as expressed in the commandments without participating in the Jewish cult. The controversies between Jesus and the religious authorities conclude with this unusual instance of the scribe who is near the kingdom of God. That comment also is very significant. This insight into the primacy of love actually places one within the kingdom of God, which is what Jesus is all about, what he came to inaugurate in the hearts and minds of those who believe in him. The scribe’s insight comes close to making him a follower of Jesus.

What is ultimately revealed in this interchange is a priceless insight. It is not a moral system that sets Christianity apart from other religions that could teach us something about living a moral life. Rather, it is the unique manifestation of God in Jesus, a manifestation that the scribe in the story recognizes. The scribe recognizes Jesus as a great Teacher, and Jesus

recognizes the scribe as a pilgrim moving towards the kingdom. Their lived out devotion to God and others silences the debates.

The second reading from Hebrews builds on that insight. The unique sacrifice of Jesus is the culmination of salvation history. It closes a long epoch of preparation; it occurs at the “appointed time”; and it begins the last days. Though the Last Day will follow only at some unspecified time in the future, salvation for the human race has been in essence certain from the moment when, in the person of Jesus, it died to sin and rose to live again. Hebrews makes a special point of how the whole of this hope flows from the unique, unrepeatable sacrifice of Jesus. Being unrepeatable, this sacrifice is different from all others in the Old Testament, since these had to be repeated again and again because they were unable actually to save anyone. Unlike the other high priests who are mortal, Jesus, because he is eternal, has an eternal priesthood that is salvific, able to redeem and save us, and he intercedes for us at the right hand of the Father.

So what are the implications for us? There is an invitation for us here to place our faith in Jesus, to continue to be open to the deep and mysterious ways that his kingdom is growing among us, to live the Great Commandment, to avoid being judgmental and thinking that we have God in a box that we have created out of human effort and calculated donations.

Sometimes, young people can lead the way. Many years ago, a volunteer at Stanford Hospital in the States got to know a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. The volunteer saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, “Yes, I’ll do it if it will save Liz.” As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as we all did, seeing the color returning to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, “Will I start to die right away?” Being so young, the boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give his sister all of his blood.

The Eucharist that we celebrate is in itself a living out of the Great Commandment of Jesus. We have gathered to love God back with our whole

being through worship in spirit and truth. We love ourselves by opening ourselves up to the forgiveness and healing power of God. We are gathered in fellowship to love and care for one another, and then we are sent out to love and care for all those we meet.

May our celebration today help us love God with our whole being, love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and find Christ in the least and weakest among us.