

Not two loves, but one

Thirtieth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – 25 October 2020

Readings: Ex 22:20-27; 1 Thess 1:5-10; Mt 22:34-40

“You must love the Lord your God –and, you must love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt)

Prologue: The love of God and love of neighbour can never be separated; each flows from, and is dependent on, the other. On the one hand, Jesus seems to simplify “the Law and the Prophets” in just one word: love; but, on the other, by so doing he poses a challenge to his detractors, urging them to go far beyond what their legalistic mindsets were capable of conceiving.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading belongs to the so-called ‘*Covenant Code*’ of the Book of Exodus—spanning 20:22 to 23:19, the second of the law codes given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai—containing laws about worship, slaves, homicide, injuries, property, restitution of wrongs and social relations. Today’s passage (verses 21-27) concerns care of the most vulnerable and least protected of society—aliens, widows and orphans, called the *anawim*—since each of these were in some way ‘less’ than the others: friendless, spouseless and parentless, respectively. Thus, God would make up for this ‘less’ or ‘lack’ which aliens, widows and orphans experienced in their dealings with people by loving them ‘more’. The Israelites are reminded that they, too, were sojourners and aliens in Egypt and thus God expects them to be compassionate to the poor in small matters, for example, never exacting interest from their debtors (v.25). God’s law was essentially humane and a reflection of *who* God was for the people. In accepting and obeying laws that were humane and merciful towards others, the Israelites were to show their love for Yahweh. However, if anyone was unjust towards the poor, God would hear their cries, as the last line says succinctly: “If your neighbour cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate” (v.27).
2. At every turn of his road towards Jerusalem in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is being tested time and again by his ‘enemies’ who he challenges for their holier-than-thou hypocrisy and loveless legalism. Today’s text is one more ‘*test*’ which Jesus has to face—a trap set in order to ‘catch him’ and show him in poor light before the public in whose eyes he was held in high esteem. Last Sunday, we had the passage of the Pharisees befriending the Herodians to trap him about paying taxes (22:15-22), followed by the Sadducees ganging up to hear his views about the resurrection with a farfetched case of a woman who marries seven brothers (22:23-33). Now comes round three: “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together ...” (v.34). What better way to trap the carpenter’s son from Nazareth than throw him into a labyrinth of laws—territory supposedly totally unfamiliar to him, and which they, the Pharisees, were unquestioned experts in? And, who else would they choose but a “*lawyer* [who] asked him a question to *test* him: ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’” (vv.35-36). They thought that they had Jesus on the ropes: forced to choose just one law—the greatest—among over six hundred laws, dos and don’ts which governed each and every aspect of their lives. Jesus really neither chooses one nor two but points to the core of reality upon which all laws and each and every prophetic pronouncement was founded: Love!

3. Any pious Jew would agree that the love of God expressed in the ‘*Shema*’—the “Hear, O Israel...” prayer (Deut 6:4-5) recited morning and evening—was central to their faith. However, Jesus was going far beyond their expectations when he said, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (quoting from Lev 19:18); for not many would agree that the love of neighbour was as important as love of God. Yet, by juxtaposing ‘love of God’ with ‘love of neighbour’ Jesus was not only making an abstract ‘love of God’ commandment very concrete, down-to-earth and practical, but, was indirectly telling the Pharisees that, for all their hollow claims to holiness and righteousness, they had understood little of what was really important and what was not. “On these two commandments *hang* the whole Law and the Prophets” (v.40) is the punchline since, without one deep, interior love—embracing passion for God and compassion for the poor—everything else collapses. Reflecting further on ‘*who*’ the neighbour is, while the Jew of Jesus’ time would take ‘neighbour’ to mean a ‘fellow Jew’, in the parable of the Good Samaritan the ‘neighbour’ would be “the one who showed mercy” (Lk 10:37) to the one lying wounded and forsaken by the roadside.

Possible Link in the Responsorial Psalm and the 2nd Reading:

The response to the psalm says quite simply: “I love you, Lord, my strength” (18:1). It is a psalm of thanksgiving for victory as the words shield, fortress, stronghold, victory, etc., indicate. In the second reading, Paul continues to praise the Thessalonian-believers since they “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (v.9). Paul commends them since service to a living God would entail true worship comprising not just offering of gifts to deities in temples but love made fruitful in service. Thus, despite persecutions, their lives had become “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (v.7)—glowing examples of the Christian word “received with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” (v.6). The love of their neighbour matched their love for God.

Three Texts from Tradition:

Augustine of Hippo (534-430): “Love God and do as you please.”

Pope Benedict XVI during the ‘Angelus’ on September 25, 2005: “Jesus’ entire earthly existence, from conception to death on the Cross, was a single act of love, so much so that we can summarize our faith in these words: *Jesus Caritas*, Jesus Love.”

Pope Francis in this month’s encyclical letter ‘*Fratelli Tutti*’ n.81: “Jesus challenges us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked. I should no longer say that I have neighbours to help, but that I must myself be a neighbour to others.”

A Guiding Light: A guru asked his disciples: “When can you tell when night has ended and day has dawned?” One them answered: “When I can see an animal from a distance and tell whether it is a cow or a goat” and another replied, “When I look at a tree from afar and can tell whether it’s a mango tree or a neem tree.” After the guru said that they were all wrong, he explained: “When you see the face of any poor, needy person and recognize in him or her your brother, sister, neighbour or friend. Failing to do that, no matter what time it is by the sun, it is still night.”

Kabir says, “The flute of the Infinite is played endlessly and its melody is love!” Jesus’ law of love endlessly embraces love of neighbour and love of God – not two loves, but melodiously one!
