

## Sunday 31

So often in the Gospels the Lord Jesus is portrayed as meeting with opposition. Many of his interactions with the leaders of his people, the scribes and the Pharisees, have a hostile tone to them. That may seem strange to us since we presume that Jesus came preaching a message of love. But clearly some of his contemporaries did not understand his message to be such. They saw it instead as threatening and hostile, and so ultimately they plotted and succeeded in removing him from the scene.

But today's Gospel is an exception to that rule. A scribe approaches Jesus and asks him a question which seems to be an honest one. He is not attempting to trap Jesus in some difficulty but simply wants to know which of the many commandments in their tradition is, in Jesus' opinion, the most important. Jesus answers him by quoting the Shema, that is, the verses from the Book of Deuteronomy which Jews were supposed to recite daily: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." That is the most important of all the commandments, Jesus tells the man. His answer is a very traditional one, for Jesus is aligning himself with what was

recognized by all as the most important of all the commandments. For, if it had not been recognized as such, it would not have been singled out as the commandment which Jews were told to pray everyday.

But Jesus then adds a second commandment taken from the Book of Leviticus, 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Some scholars claim that the combining of this second commandment with the first one was Jesus’ creation, but others say that that is not the case, that this combining of the two can be found in Jewish wisdom literature before the Lord’s time. The commentator Reginald Fuller then asks: If that is the case, “...is there anything distinctive about Jesus’ use of this combination? “Yes,” Fuller answers, “for Jesus understands the interconnection between the two commandments in a quite radical sense. Love of God is illusory if it does not issue in love of neighbor, and love of neighbor is refined self-love if it does not proceed from the love of God.”

That last sentence is Fuller’s interpretation. He is claiming that Jesus makes the love of neighbor absolutely essential to the love of God. Certainly, that is how the Christian tradition has understood the relationship of these two commandments. Yet it may be hard

for some of us to see such a connection in this text itself since here Jesus simply lists the second commandment, love of neighbor, after the second, and leaves it at that. He does not explain how they are related. And yet we all feel that Fuller's interpretation is correct, and we believe that we can find other passages and sentences in the New Testament which prove this. Love of God is false unless it includes love of neighbor, we think, and we cannot love God whom we do not see if we cannot love our neighbor whom we do see.

If someone were to ask us to give chapter and verse to prove this point, to prove that the love of neighbor is part and parcel of love of God, that, as Fuller said, love of God without love of neighbor is illusory and that love of neighbor without love of God is nothing more than a case of refined self-love, what would we come up with? Maybe we would seek our proof in the Letters of John. In his First Letter John writes: "Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness." And "this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother." But then we might resort to a hymn like: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren, that you do unto me." Then we would look for the text which is the source of this hymn. In Mt 7:12 we

would find: “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.” Then we might say to ourselves: Even if I cannot find an exact quote from the SS which shows that the love of God and of neighbor are so essentially joined that they cannot be separated from each other, I still believe that that is true, that that is the correct understanding of Christian faith. And then we might stop and say: Of course it is, for Jesus is God and man. Jesus has joined the two in his own reality. Therefore, in following him we have to love human beings, for he is one of them. And that would be enough.

Sisters and Brothers: At the moment we are in an awful situation in the church. What could be more dreadful than to see the sinful actions of bishops and priests paraded before the world? Nevertheless, we are going to go on because our message is one of love: love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus has joined the two commandments together. Even more, he himself is the union of God and the human. If we live this wonderful message of love, our church will survive this present crisis. For Christians will emerge who will live this double commandment fully. Like Mother Teresa, they will look at the poor and deplorable in our world and see Christ in them and will therefore love them. And when the world sees that, it will see beyond our sinfulness.