

Thirtieth Sunday of the Year October 29, 2017

Exodus 22:20-26; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-30

Love of God is the essence of our Christian life. Our Christian religion is based on the love of God and the love of our neighbors. The love of God implies not merely the notional assent to the truths of faith, but in the real, conscious, wholehearted response that makes God the chief motivation and reason of our life. The love of one's neighbor is perhaps one of the surprising characteristics of our Christian faith as indicated in the importance given to the duty of loving others. Several passages from the Gospel show the practical necessity of the Christian precept of loving one's neighbor and the association Jesus himself makes with the poorest and humblest. In our Christian practice it is necessary to search for the personal experience of God that uniquely religious and sacred experience found only by those who search for it. This is done principally in silence, solitude and dedication to personal prayer. This requires the time and the disposition to identify the religious experience of God in our lives and to let it take root in our minds and hearts. We need to open our minds and find the time necessary to become aware of the presence of God in our lives. This is not easy to do, especially as we have become accustomed to ways of perception and of thinking that are always in hurry and are functional. It takes a great effort to learn a meditative way of perceiving reality that allow us, moved by grace, to experience something of the presence of God. The Gospel of today tells us that we ought to love God our Lord with all our hearts, soul and strength and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Book of Exodus recalls some specific provisions of the Law with regard to strangers and to the poor and unfortunate. St Paul on the other hand advises the Thessalonians they have to be an example to others and he himself has been a guide to them.

In the first reading of today taken from the Book of Exodus tells us of the loving relationship that the Israelites ought to have towards those under-privileged. The responsibility was upon men, because in those days, they were the persons with authority over the families. The under-privileged were the aliens or the immigrants, those who were forced to leave their homes because of circumstances such as wars, plagues or famines. The Lord reminds the Israelites that once they too were as aliens while living in Egypt. Now, their Laws command them to be warm and helpful to those who are less fortunate as they themselves once were less fortunate. They are reminded once again of their loving obligation

to take care of the needs of the widows and the orphans. God wanted the needs of these aliens and poor be looked after by those who were more fortunate. The Israelites are told that if the widows and orphans are neglected or abused and their cries reach out to Heaven, God would hear them and His anger would punish the aggressors. Their families would suffer the same consequences, their wives becoming widows and their children become orphans. The people were reminded that if they abused the ancient Law and the victims of this abuse cried out to God in prayer, He would hear their cries and He would no longer answer the prayers of those who abused the Law. They would be denied the blessings that they had received in the past. God is their protector.

In the Second Reading, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his living example among them for their sake so that they may grow in Christ. He tells them to imitate him as he imitates Jesus Christ. To fully live one's Christian life, it is necessary to "become imitators of God, as beloved children, to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Paul acknowledged that through persecution, the Thessalonians persisted in their living faith, receiving the Word of God with joy. They were indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit so that they could become as living models to others who heard about them in Macedonia and Achaia. These were the communities where Paul was residing when the good news about the Thessalonians reached him. He tells them that the joy in their faith during persecution is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and true imitation of Christ. In his letter Paul emphasized how the people had abandoned their idols to serve the true living God. The word idol in this case meant the false gods that did not exist. True conversion in the living faith means to completely depart from the worship of idols in order to give oneself wholeheartedly in the service of God. In a true conversion, the Christian lives the love of God, truly being the Christian that he claims to be. Paul continued by saying that it is by living one's faith in Christ that we are rescued from the justice of God that will befall the unrepentant sinners. We do not know when this justice will come and it could be immediate or at a distant future. But they are to be ready and remain always in harmony with God. Otherwise a person can risk being the object of the wrath of God.

As we read and listen to the Gospel according to Matthew, we find ourselves at a stage where Jesus is being challenged by various leading groups from among the Jewish community. Matthew after describing Christ's triumphant entry into

Jerusalem on the Sunday before his crucifixion gives a series of attempts made by his enemies, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, to catch Jesus in some legalistic or political error. Today's question placed before him is about the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses. Already Jesus had reduced a group of Sadducees to silence, much to the delight of their rivals, the Pharisees. Now it is some Pharisees who approach him with their own question, a question much debated among the religious Jews: "Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" Unlike other encounters, certainly there is no malice in this approach. They had been several disputes among themselves as regard to this question. As a Rabbi, extremely intelligent, influential with the crowds and known by many as someone with a mind of his own, Jesus should have his own opinion. This question was reasonable since like today, the Law of those days contained 613 different Commandments. 248 of them were favorable while 365 were things that ought not to be done. They spent much of their time in arguing over trivial details of observance of the norms. This question given in today's passage is about going to the very heart of the matter. Among so many laws, whether there was any law which touched the core of people's relationship with God. Again, how could one summarize the law for the sake of people and make them understand in a simple way.

Jesus often answered people's questions with one of his own but in this case he gives an answer. Here he responded immediately to their question by combining two commandments into one. He told them: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your entire mind." The heart was considered as the center of knowing and feeling, the soul, the principle of life and the source of all one's energies, and mind the center of perception. Quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, he tells them that this is the first and most important Commandment. It summarizes the first four of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. Placing God first in one's life means walking in faith and in the love of God. The second greatest and equally important Commandment is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This Commandment summarizes the last six of the Ten Commandments given to Moses. The second Commandment means that if we have the love of God within us, it should shine towards others. Love is meant to be shared, not to be selfishly kept to oneself. Then Jesus said that on those two Commandments (Laws) hangs the Law and the Prophets. The words mean that in those two Commandments are found the entire revelation of the Old Testament. Christ's clear-cut answer was that the

two commandments of the love of God and the love of neighbor were the essence of the Old Testament and the basis for the New Testament. This was not only the answer for the Pharisees but an answer and a rule of life for all of us for all time. To have the love of God as Christ enjoyed it, our acts of love should be towards God first and then towards our neighbors. Our neighbors include everyone, our families, our friends, the strangers and even enemies whom we do not like. Our love for God must be greater than the love we have for our parents, our brothers and sisters, our spouse and even our children.

Looking at the passage given to us it looks as if the Pharisees may not have had any evil intention in asking this question. But they did a good service by getting this crystal clear answer from Jesus. In this answer he tells us that the man who loves God and his neighbor fulfills all his obligations, and carries out all the duties that God's self-revelation in the law and the Prophets imposes on him. God revealed himself in the Old Testament as a creator and benefactor and looked after all the needs of people. In his benevolence he shared all he had with humanity and made humankind partakers in his kingdom of happiness. Jesus strongly emphasizes the fact that love of our neighbor is an essential part of our obligation towards God. If we fail in this we fail in our love for God, for we refuse to carry out this sacred duty. If we fail to recognize our neighbor as our brother we fail to recognize God as our Father and we do not love him. For Matthew, Jesus is providing the foundation upon which every Christian must build his or her understanding of the Christian life. Love of God and love of neighbor must motivate and guide everything a Christian says and does. The text that Jesus provided meant that we are to love God with everything we have: a love which is whole hearted, outgoing, performed with conviction, courage and commitment.

In the concept of the love of God, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that the central commandment of the Jewish and Christian faith is the love of God implies not merely the notional assent to the truths of faith, but the real, conscious, wholehearted response that makes God the chief motivation and reason in their life. There is implied a certain human experience of God and it is the discernment and assimilation of this experience that is to ground and shape our lives. The second and third commandments remind us of the challenges we face to the sacred love of God. Jesus was making a significant change in linking these two commandments together as one and inseparable. From the rest of the New Testament it is clear that one cannot love God without loving one's brothers and

sisters at the same time. Nor does a person love others just for God's sake or to please God or observe a commandment. One is expected to go much further. One does not go to God through others but one seeks, finds and loves God in others. In the Final Judgment he says that as often as we did or did not do an action or work to the very least of our brothers and sisters, we did or did not do it to Jesus. He identifies himself with the hungry and thirsty, with the naked, the sick and those in prison. Jesus identifies himself with those in most need of love and compassion. He is also to be loved in the leper, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the homeless, the outcast and even in the enemy who threatens us.

The readings of today easily remind us how God expresses his love for us. Most of the time, God shows his love for us through the people that enter our life. He loves us when they love the other and we love God when we sincerely love our brothers and sisters. Matthew indicates to us that Jesus has no hesitation when responding to the question of the greatest command is in the scriptures. It is simply the commandment to love. They tell us of a love which involves treating every single person with deep respect, with love, with justice, with compassion. It reaches out even to those who do not behave well or wish to hurt us. The Old Testament reading tells us of God's compassionate response always exists to the cry of the poor, the widow, the orphans and the foreigners. Paul tells the people how they become imitators of the Lord and must be models for others to follow. This is how God works in our lives. God loves us and his love is a continual and everlasting love. He does call us to respond to this love by making it present to others. Sometimes a human person does deliberately reject that intimate love of his through negligence. However, God does not stop loving us and he constantly reaches out to our love. We are always certain that God's love is offered to human persons and is never taken back. It comes in the sunset, in creation, in friendship, in our service to others, and in our desire to reconcile. God expects us to respond to this love through our gratitude to him and express it in our service to our brothers and sisters. Strangely enough, to implement these loves effectively, we may have to reverse the order: love of self, leading to love others, finally to the love of God.

In ancient times, a King had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove the huge rock. Some of the king's wealthiest merchants and courtiers came by and simply walked around it. Many loudly blamed the King for not keeping the roads clear, but none did anything

about getting the stone out of the way. Then a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. Upon approaching the boulder, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded. After the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the King indicating that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the roadway. The peasant learned what many of us never understand - "Every obstacle presents an opportunity to improve our condition."

In New York City, on a cold day in December, a little boy, about 10-years-old, was standing before a shoe store on the roadway, barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold. A lady approached the young boy and said, 'my, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!' 'I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes,' was the boy's reply. The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her. She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel. By this time, the clerk had returned with the socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, she purchased him a pair of shoes. She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, 'No doubt, you will be more comfortable now.' As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her. 'Are you God'? No, said the woman. I am only his child. The boy smiled and said: I knew it all the time. You are some relation of his.

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