

Sunday Homily

FOURTH SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT

31 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

“The first is... ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’
The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

Mark 12:29-31)

Illustration

Pascal wrote, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction.” When we look at events throughout history and the world today, we see many examples of peoples of all religions causing suffering, pain and death to their fellow human beings. In such cases, the carrying out of what some believe to be God’s will has terrible consequences for others, others who are counted as expendable in this “higher” purpose. Tragically, in such cases, a wholehearted dedication to God seems to reduce people’s compassion for others.

In contrast, many take an opposite position: instead of focusing upon God’s will above everything else, they disregard God and concentrate upon the needs of humanity. Those who think this way see no need for God, reasoning that we can look after each other well enough, if not better, without religion.

Today’s Gospel reading reflects what Jesus believed about the compatibility of a wholehearted devotion to God with a desire to serve humanity.

Gospel Teaching

Jesus has faced a series of trick questions from both Sadducees and Pharisees attempting to catch him out before the crowd. The teacher of the law in our Gospel reading, though, appears to be sincere in what he asks. His question, “Which commandment is the first of all?”, reflected an issue over which there was much disagreement. It was held that there were 613 commandments and there was argument over whether some commandments were more significant than others and whether it was possible to sum them all up in one general principle.

In answering the scribe, Jesus made reference to two separate pieces of scripture which he linked together. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (part of the creed known as the *Shema* and recited daily by Jews) and Leviticus 19:18. He was only asked to cite one commandment but instead chose two, the implication being that he saw a strong connection between them.

To love God with all our “heart”, “soul”, “mind” and “strength” is a reminder that this love involves not just emotion but everything about us – our thoughts,

energy, will, ability and understanding – and is a love which includes action and obedience. Our need to make God central in our lives is reinforced in Mark's version of the event where Jesus' quote from Deuteronomy also includes the words, "the Lord is one", which emphasises that only God is worthy of our worship and devotion.

In the original quotation from Leviticus the word "neighbour" would have referred to Israelites alone, but the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) suggests that Jesus' definition of neighbour was much wider, embracing all humanity, including one's enemies.

Application

For Jesus, there was no clash between focusing upon God and meeting the needs of humanity. In fact, naming these two commandments as greater than the others shows that Jesus saw them as interconnected. The teaching of 1 John 4:21 sums up this connection: "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also". If we truly love God we will also love God's creation, humanity. Indeed 1 John goes as far as to say that if we hate our brother or sister then we cannot love God (1 John 4:20): the two things are mutually exclusive.

Jesus also believed there was no place for neglecting God to focus solely upon humanity: after all, he names the love of God as the first commandment. Of course, humanists are right that much good can be done without any reference to religion, but recognising the unconditional nature of God's care for us brings a new depth to our own understanding of, and ability to, love. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because he first loved us." Only in Christ's death on the cross do we see what love really is: love goes beyond caring for those who love us and from whom we get something back. It involves loving those, too, whom Jesus viewed as our neighbours: those we dislike, those we don't understand and those we don't approve of. His example gives us the motivation and strength to take love beyond its usual human limitations.

So making God central in our lives shouldn't distance us from others but encourage us to value each individual. The love of God and the love of humanity are inseparably bound together. Indeed, Jesus made this point very strongly in his parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) in which he taught that it is in caring for others that we serve Christ himself.