

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees they got together and, to disconcert him, one of them put a question, 'Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?' Jesus said, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also.'

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

This Sunday, the Liturgy presents us with a brief, but very important Gospel passage. Matthew the Evangelist recounts that the Pharisees assemble in order to put Jesus to the test. One of them, a doctor of the Law, asks him this question: "Teacher, which one is the great commandment in the law?". It is an insidious question, because more than 600 precepts are mentioned in the Law of Moses. How should the *great commandment* be distinguished among these? But Jesus responds without hesitation: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". And he adds: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

This response of Jesus is not to be taken for granted, because, among the numerous precepts of the Hebrew Law, the most important were the 10 Commandments, communicated directly by God to Moses, as the conditions of the Covenant with the people. But Jesus wants to make it understood that without love for God and for our neighbour there is no true fidelity to this Covenant with the Lord. You may do many good things, fulfil many precepts, many good things, but if you do not have love, this serves no purpose.

It is confirmed by another text in the Book of Exodus, the so-called "Covenant Code", where it is said that one cannot adhere to the Covenant with the Lord and mistreat those who enjoy his protection. And who are those

who enjoy his protection? The Bible says: the widow, the orphan and the stranger, the migrant, that is, the most lonely and defenseless people (cf. Ex 22:20-21).

In responding to those Pharisees who question him, Jesus also tries to help them put their religiosity in order, to distinguish what truly matters from what is less important. Jesus says: "On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets". They are the most important, and the others depend on these two. And Jesus lived his life precisely in this way: preaching and practising what truly matters and is essential, namely, love. Love gives impulse and fruitfulness to life and to the journey of life: without love, both life and faith remain sterile.

What Jesus proposes in this Gospel passage is a wonderful ideal, which corresponds to our heart's most authentic desire. Indeed, we were created to love and to be loved. God, who is Love, created us to make us participants in his life, to be loved by him and to love him, and with him, to love all other people. This is God's "dream" for humankind. And to accomplish it we need his grace; we need to receive within us the capacity to love which comes from God himself. Jesus offers himself to us in the Eucharist for this very reason. In it we receive Jesus in the utmost expression of his love, when he offered himself to the Father for our salvation.

May the Blessed Virgin help us to welcome into our life the "great commandment" of love of God and neighbour. Indeed, if we have experienced it ever since we were children, we will never cease converting ourselves to it and putting it into practice in the various situations in which we find ourselves.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Pope Francis suggests that we may do many good things, fulfil many precepts, but if we do not have love, this serves no purpose. What does 'having love' behind our actions mean?
- What does it mean to 'love with all your heart, mind, soul and strength'? Whom do you love in this way, how?
- What might it mean to love God, neighbour and self in this way?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.