

## GOSPEL

MARK 12:28-34

One of the scribes came up to Jesus and put a question to him, ‘Which is the first of all the commandments?’ Jesus replied, ‘This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’ The scribe said to him, ‘Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice.’ Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ And after that no one dared to question him any more.

## A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

At the heart of this Sunday’s Gospel passage, there is the commandment of love: *love of God and love of neighbour*. A scribe asks Jesus: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (v. 28). He responds by quoting the profession of faith with which every Israelite opens and closes his day, and begins with the words “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut 6:4). In this manner Israel safeguards its faith in the fundamental reality of its whole creed: only one Lord exists and that Lord is ‘ours’ in the sense that he is bound to us by an indissoluble pact; he loved us, loves us, and will love us for ever. It is from this source, this love of God, that the twofold commandment comes to us: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.... You shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

In choosing these two Words addressed by God to his people and by putting them together, Jesus taught once and for all that love for God and love for neighbour are inseparable; moreover, they sustain one another.

Even if set in a sequence, they are two sides of a single coin: experienced together they are a believer’s strength! To love God is to live of him and for him, for what he is and for what he does. Our God is unmitigated *giving*; he is unlimited *forgiveness*; he is a *relationship* that promotes and fosters. Therefore, to love God means to invest our energies each day to be his assistants in the unmitigated service of our neighbour, in trying to forgive without limitations, and in cultivating relationships of communion and fraternity.

Mark the Evangelist does not bother to specify *who* the neighbour is, because a neighbour is a person whom I meet on the journey, in my days. It is not a matter of pre-selecting my neighbour: this is not Christian. I think my neighbour is the one I have chosen ahead of time: no, this is not Christian, it is pagan; but it is about having eyes to see and a heart to want what is good for him or her. If we practice seeing with Jesus’ gaze, we will always be listening and be close to those in need. Of course our neighbour’s needs require effective responses, but even beforehand they require sharing. With one look we can say that the hungry need not just a bowl of soup, but also a smile, to be listened to and also a prayer, perhaps said together. Today’s Gospel passage invites us all to be projected not only toward the needs of our poorest brothers and sisters, but above all to be attentive to their need for fraternal closeness, for a meaning to life, and for tenderness. This challenges our Christian communities: it means avoiding the risk of being communities that have many initiatives but few relationships; the risk of being community ‘service stations’ but with little company, in the full and Christian sense of this term.

God, who is love, created us to love and so that we can love others while remaining united with him. It would be misleading to claim to love our neighbour without loving God; and it would also be deceptive to claim to love God without loving our neighbour. The two dimensions of love, for

God and for neighbour, in their unity characterize the disciple of Christ. May the Virgin Mary help us to welcome and bear witness in everyday life to this luminous lesson.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How do you experience the love of God, and express your love of God?
- The two dimensions of love, for God and for neighbour, in their unity characterize the disciple of Christ. Remembering that God loved us first, how do you express your love of God? How do you express your love neighbour?
- Pope Francis says our Christian communities must avoid the risk of being communities that have many initiatives but few relationships; the risk of being community ‘service stations’ but with little company. What would youtube help bring this about?

## 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.