

October 25, 2020

Ex 22:20-26; 1 Thes 1:5c-10; Mt 22:34-40

Sometimes things that seem very complicated can actually be more simple. When Jesus gives the two commandments today he is not removing all the other commandments of God's law and all else that God has taught - It's not like he's saying: "hey guess what, now only 2 commandments, and don't worry about all that other stuff." He uses these two commandments to show us the points from which all the other laws hang - and thus gives us the big picture. Like putting together a puzzle is easier if you have the picture, he provides the larger picture into which the other parts fit.

In the scene in the Gospel Jesus is being questioned by the Pharisees. They were pretty impressed by some other answers he had given, and maybe were wanting to check further to see if he was really knowledgeable enough to teach publicly. They send a "scholar of the law" - essentially a religious expert - to question him. The scholar asks what law is the greatest. Now remember that there were the 10 commandments, and also over 600 other laws that are mentioned in scripture - this is a tough question. Jesus' response is unexpected. He doesn't quote any of the 10 commandments or any other laws - instead he quotes the Shema Israel. This prayer comes from the book of Deuteronomy and was said by all devout Jews at least three times a day. It was seen as so central that it would have been taught to little children as their most basic prayer, and it was as familiar as the Our Father is to us. *Hear O' Israel the Lord your God is One, therefore You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.* This is the most basic thing God commands.

What does it mean to love with your heart and soul and mind? It means to keep our mind filled with the things of God. There are so many things that we are exposed to, so many voices which speak counter to God's voice. As we let these things into our minds, and as we continue to give them more and more space in that mind, two things happen: (1) There is less room in there for God's voice. Less room to meditate on the things of God, less room to devote ourselves to the praise and thanksgiving to God, less room to hear God speak to us; (2) Since our hearts - that is our emotions, desires, and loyalties - become lined up with our mind. We tend to give ourselves, in love, to those things with which we fill our minds. Mind shapes heart, and then our

whole being and its will and decision - the soul - follows after what the heart loves. If we do not love God with our mind, we will feel less love of God in our heart, and we will give ourselves not to God, but to things of less value.

But Jesus does not stop there, he adds one more commandment than he was asked for. After he states part of the Shema he says: *This is the greatest and the first commandment, The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* If we love God with our mind, and heart, and soul, then we will be shaped by God and love as God loves. This love will flow to all people (ourselves included). Just as we would protect ourselves from something heading to our face, we will jump in to protect another, just as we would fight ferociously if we were drowning, so too we would fight with that same energy for justice and the needs of others.

Our first reading gives us more of an idea about how God loves, and who God loves. God speaks here about the aliens, widows, and orphans in the land - the outsiders who are not part of the nation, and the lowest members of society. God hears them when they are in trouble - even though others think them insignificant and unworthy: *If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.* This vengeance language can trouble some, but God is really just trying to use exaggeration to make a point. God presents the image of a parent fighting for its child who is hurt and in trouble. That parental protective instinct is so deep that they can “lose their mind” when their young are threatened and lash out. This exaggerated language is God’s way of showing how deep, and primal, and instinctual God’s love is for all people. This instinct is deeply part of who God is, and those who love as God loves will have that same instinctual reaction to show love for others.

All the other laws, all the other commandments, all the other parts of scripture and teachings of the Church all are part of this big picture - that’s why Jesus says: *The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.* Jesus does this himself and he gives his own life for us like the loving parent would step in front of a bullet to protect their young. Jesus shows us what it is to love God with mind and heart and soul, and in his life and action, gives us an example of how to love others as self. In doing so we *serve the living and true God* and allow ourselves - and the world around us - to be molded by the infinite love of God.