

31st Sunday of Year

Last week we left Jesus in Jericho, about to enter Jerusalem for the last time. Today's Gospel leaps past Palm Sunday, and the disputes with the Jewish authorities to the final elements of Our Lord's teaching. A scribe questions Jesus, but it seems with an open mind rather than to trap him. He asks him about one of the disputed issues of the day. The Jewish Law ran to 613 commandments. How could you know which was the most important? It is a question with some depth. He doesn't expect Jesus just to plump for one of them. The translation does not really do justice to his question, which is really, 'What sort of commandment comes first?'

Our Lord takes him seriously. He does not simply point to the first of the Ten Commandments of Moses. Instead he quotes the verse from Deuteronomy with which Jews begin and end the day: "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 you mind and with all your strength." Then he adds a passage from Leviticus, "You must love your neighbour as yourself." Neither of these is new or unique to Jesus.

What IS new is to link them in this way. Contemporary rabbis would have said, "the Law, sacrifices, and works of love." Duty would come first. Our Lord takes a different starting point, the decision we make about the meaning of life. In Deuteronomy Moses faces the people with a choice. Do you believe there is one God? How will you respond to him? He gives them this prayer as a daily reminder. If we believe there is a God, and that all we have and are is his loving gift, this shapes the way we see the world. Our first response is to love him in return. Everything else follows from this. If we love him, then we also love all that he has made. We will love ourselves, and we will love other people. This is the over-arching principle that unites all the commandments. If the more detailed commandments seem to clash this principle enables us to sort out our priorities. In the end there cannot be a real contradiction between loving God and loving our neighbour.

There is a second point for us to reflect on. Duty can be a pretty bloodless affair. We can keep the Ten Commandments, but without love. Our Lord expects more of us. Love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. Love involves every fibre of our being. It involves heart - our emotions, and will, our inner driving force. It involves our soul or psyche – our values and attitudes. It involves our mind – thinking through the implications and demands of love, and making decisions. It involves our strength – more than brute power this means resilience and determination. We have to apply these to our love for God. We have to demonstrate them in the value we attach to our own lives; otherwise we devalue the love we give our neighbour. We have to show them in our love for other people. There can be no place for self-hatred in the Christian, or for lack of interest in other people. We may not be able to like them – sometimes we may not like ourselves that much – but we can love them in the sense of applying our wills to wanting what is best for them and our minds, our energy and our bodily strength to meeting their needs.

Some of the commandments seem negative in tone – they are intended to set a bottom line for us by ruling out certain choices – but how can we claim to love God or our neighbour if we do not respect these? Others are more positive in tone. 'Honour your father and mother' is a challenge to an open ended love and commitment. St Paul takes this principle and applies it more widely to husbands and wives and all our family relationships. In fact he applies it to all our social relationships including those in the work place. People can never be treated simply as a means to an end. Our engagement with a tradesperson or the assistant in a shop or someone at the other end of a phone line is a human being with his or her own life and concerns – a neighbour just as much as the person next door. In St Luke's Gospel the young man who asks Jesus the question goes on to test how far this extends. 'Who is my neighbour?' Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan in response. It is natural for us to prioritise our families – but do we set limits to our love and care?