

Homily of Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B, 2021

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Psalm 18:2-4, 47, 51; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

The Book Deuteronomy contains laws and exhortations Moses gave to the Israelites that would guide them when they arrive to the Promised Land, "a land flowing with milk and honey." Today's first reading contains the central statement of belief of the Jewish people known as Shema Israel. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Moses went further to instruct, "Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7).

At the time of Jesus, some teachers and interpreters of the law emphasized that the more burnt offerings and sacrifices the people offered, and the more tithes the people paid, the closer they were to God. The scribe, an interpreter of the law, most likely, wanted to know Jesus' opinion. Jesus replied by quoting the Shema Israel, and added Leviticus 19:19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The amazed scribe acknowledged that to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself are "worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." We recall that Jesus, in Luke 11:12, condemned the Pharisees, "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and love of God." Even now, does Jesus not condemn prosperity preachers whose priority is on their congregation's paying of tithes over and above love of God and love of neighbor?

Love of God and love of neighbor are like two hinges of a door. One of the hinges is love of God, and the other hinge is love of neighbor. If any of the hinges is absent, the door ceases to function. 1 John 4:19-21 says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."

At creation, God said, "Let us create man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves..." (Genesis 1:26). We share in God's divine nature. Therefore, we have done to God what we have done to others because each of us is God's image. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus teaches, "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." In Acts 9:4-5, Jesus asked Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul asked Jesus, "Who are you Lord?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus did not ask Saul why he was persecuting the Christians, but "Why are you persecuting me?"

Love of neighbor is so important in our relationship with God that St. Peter writes, "Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). In the same understanding 1 John 3:14 says, "We are aware that we have passed over from death to life because we love our brother."

A chaplain wrote about an incident which took place in a prayer-discussion group in the prison where he ministered. "It was a windy evening ... There was little heat in the room. An inmate ... having come in a T-shirt and trousers, was shivering. Another inmate had come with his shoulders wrapped up in two blankets. Then, while they were discussing the idea of helping each other, the inmate that had two blankets suddenly got up, walked to the other inmate, and put one of his blankets around him." This incident reminds us of John the Baptist's advice to the crowd, "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise" (Luke 3:11). James also writes, "If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:15-17). In this context, love of God is faith; good works is love of neighbor.

Pope Francis writes in his encyclical letter, *The Light of Christ*, "Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love" (No.35).

We are invited and challenged, especially during these difficult times, to go and express our love of God by sharing with the needy our extra 'blankets' and extra 'tunics.' Refusal of the invitation and challenge means that the claim to love God is false.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP