

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Exodus 22:21-27 / Matthew 23:34-400)
26.10.2014

Parts of Pope Francis' final address to those gathered in Rome for the recent Synod on the Family came to mind as I read today's gospel passage, as indeed does a line from the well-known Beatles' song *All you need is love*. Some of you may remember how the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, lauded that song some years ago, during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, around the time he published his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est, God is Love*, saying that the Beatles' song title was a summary of the whole gospel message:

All you need is love is the basic message we hear reiterated by the Word of God read for us this morning.

Today's gospel passage is a call for us to simplify our priorities by bringing everything down to love. This is what we hear Jesus do in the response He makes to those who ask Him to tell them what the greatest commandment is.

Jesus always went to what was essential and especially when His opponents tried to draw things out of Him by their trick questions.

In the process he brushed aside what His great disciple, the former Pharisee, Paul, would later call, in his Letter to the Philippians, *so much rubbish* that religious people can be tempted to cling to.

In what Jesus says to the Pharisees this morning, it is evident that for Him everything is resumed in the one great commandment to love.

In the answer He gave what Jesus does, in fact, is to boil down six hundred plus regulations found in the Law of Moses into two foundational responsibilities for all of us: to love God with our whole being (everything we are) and to love our neighbour, in the same way that we love ourselves.

Clearly, for Jesus the call addressed to us is simply and entirely to commit ourselves to love: it is to love for life!

When I say *love for life* what I mean there is not just a permanent engagement in regard to one or other person or this or that ordinance.

When I speak of *love for life* I mean *love for life!*

The call addressed to us is a call **to love to the full in every situation we encounter in life.**

Jesus' basic message, rooted in Old Testament revelation (the Law and the Prophets) and fulfilled, accomplished, in His person, could be resumed in that line from the Book of Deuteronomy: *love and you shall live!*

Without love our religion is dead. Lived in love our religion is life-giving.

To love God and our neighbour as our self is to obey every other precept of the whole code of the Law.

A better two point summary of the Torah could not have been presented than that which Jesus gave in His answer to the question posed.

Jesus' declaration was: *do this and you shall live*: you shall live a life pleasing to God, a life which is good for others and for your own plenitude of life in well-being.

Jesus' basic point this morning is that God's Law is all about teaching us how to love. The Law's multiple regulations are all about fostering, enhancing, safe-guarding and protecting love.

If the Church is not getting this message across to people, if we are not helping people understand the gospel in this way, then we are not getting things right as Christian communities and/or as individual heralds of the gospel.

The line from the popular 1970's Christian song gets it in one when it says: *They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christians by our love.*

So many other things really do not matter. What really matters is love: our love which reflects God's love!

Just as it was the case in the early centuries of the Church, so today, it should be the quality of our life shared, the love we have for each other, that proves itself to be an attracting force for others, leading them to adopt gospel living.

To present to people long lists of rules and regulations is not to present them with the Law, at all. The Law properly understood and embraced is a life-giving energy, rather than a dead weight to carry.

Reduced to rules and regulations the Law is a dead letter which only serves to further deaden people who are already only half alive.

Let me quote some lines from Pope Francis' address to the Synod Fathers for you.

They are worth hearing and meditating upon as we seek to listen further to today's gospel passage in personal prayer and consideration. They are worth considering as we pursue the Church's Synod process in the coming year.

To get all the nuances of what the pope said one would have to read the whole text, but the following lines which I will share with you are those which resonated with me most strongly as I read Matthew 22: 34-40 (today's gospel passage).

I quote: *There is a temptation to hostile inflexibility, that is, wanting to close oneself within the written word, (the letter) and not allowing oneself to be surprised by God, by the God of surprises, (the spirit); within the law, within the certitude that what we know and not of what we still need to learn and to achieve. From the time of Christ, it is the temptation of the zealous, of the scrupulous, of the solicitous and of the so-called today traditionalists and also of the intellectuals.*

After drawing attention to the risk of taking easy options and turning stones into bread, the pope went on to speak of another, perhaps more prevalent temptation in the Church today - (again I quote verbatim): *The temptation to transform the bread into a stone and cast it against the sinners, the weak, the sick (cf. Jn 8:7), that is, to transform it into unbearable burdens (Lk 11:46).*

Pope Francis took up important Scriptural images when he shared his vision of the Church, saying: *The Church, the vineyard of the Lord, the fertile Mother and caring Teacher, who is not afraid to roll up her sleeves to pour oil and wine on people's wound; who does not see humanity as a house of glass to judge or categorise people. This is the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and composed of sinners, needful of God's mercy. This is the Church, the true bride of Christ, who seeks to be faithful to her spouse and doctrine. It is the Church that is not afraid to eat and drink with prostitutes and publicans. The Church that has the doors wide open to receive the needy, the penitent, and not only the just or those who believe they are perfect! The Church that is not ashamed of the fallen brother and pretends not to see him, but on the contrary feels involved and almost obliged to lift him up and to encourage him to take the journey again and accompany him toward a definitive encounter with her Spouse, in the heavenly Jerusalem.*

This is the Church our Mother!

It seems to me that this vision of things ties in with chapter 4 of the Rule of St Benedict, the chapter entitled *The Tools of Good Works*, which could be read erroneously as a list of dull precepts, but which, in fact, seeks to open up a way to life for those who live their lives guided by the gospel, as interpreted by the Rule.

What we have in chapter 4 of the Rule of St Benedict is, what Fr Michael Casey called during our community retreat of nearly two years ago, *tools for good living*.

Yes, good *living!*

It is a way of life that Benedict proposes here.

I want to keep the accent on **life**.

I find it striking that this chapter of the Rule which begins by quoting the great commandment as formulated in today's gospel passage, ends with the exhortation that we should *never ever lose hope in God's mercy*.

As we proclaim the gospel call to love, may we temper all we say with the sense of God's mercy which is offered to all those (each one of us included) who fall short of the great ideal set before us.

Amen!