

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Deuteronomy 6:2-6 / Mark 12:28-34)  
31.10.2021  
*Love & Synod*

The positive tonality of the dialogue between Jesus and the scribe about the great commandment is quite exceptional. Usually in St Mark's Gospel, Jesus' relationship with scribes is less irenic and more conflictual. This is very clear in chapter 12 from which our Gospel reading is taken: at the beginning the scribes want to arrest Jesus (v. 12) and just after our dialogue, Jesus denounces the scribes in very strong terms (v. 38-40).

In our Gospel reading, two statements seem to me particularly important. The first one is spoken by the scribe: "love... is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice." The scribe, in line with the biblical prophets, challenges the established religion of Israel and reminds us all that the very first principle of our faith is love. Here we are given a very clear criterion in order to judge all we do or say as Christians: the ultimate value which gives meaning to all things is love of God, love of the neighbour and love of self. This is what St Augustine meant when he wrote: "Once and for all, a brief precept is given to you: Love, and do what you want. (...) The root of love must be within; nothing but good can come forth from this root" (*Homilies on the First Epistle of St John*, 7:8, p. 110).

How often do we forget this! How often do we think that the sacrifices we offer to God are a way of punishing ourselves for our sins or a way of attracting God's attention and benevolence! How often do we try to buy others' love by complying with their expectations or by showering them with gifts!

The scribe reminds us that all the sacrifices we choose to make, all the efforts we produce in life are worthwhile only if they are born out of love, only if they make us grow in love and only if they bear fruit of love. The rabbi Abraham Heschel believed that "all observance is training in the art of love" (*God in Search...*, p. 307). All our sacrifices should be for us a training in the art of love, faithful love of God, welcoming love of our neighbour and caring love of ourselves.

We must mention the fact that there are also many sacrifices that are imposed on us by life and circumstances that we have not chosen. Here again, a patient and generous love is the remedy to bitterness, anger and frustration.

Only love can help us to see beyond the pain and discern the way forward. Only love can make even what are sometimes negative experiences bear positive fruits. We have to remember that "God is love" (1Jn 4:8), and that he loves us with an everlasting love (cf. Jr 31:3). We should never lose hope because the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end (cf. Lam 3:21-22).

Jesus' answer to the scribe's wise statement also merits our attention: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." I am reminded of St Paul's words: "Not that I have already reached the goal. (...) Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:2-14)

While Jesus' answer could at first appear harsh, it is in fact very encouraging. Yes the kingdom of God is within us (cf. Lk 17:21), yet, like the scribe, we are not too far from it. It is both humbling and reassuring to be reminded that we are the people of the Way (cf. Ac 9:2), a pilgrim people. None of us can claim to have fulfilled perfectly the commandment of love. We are all enrolled in the school of love and we are all slow learners.

The Synod of bishops in Rome and the Synod of the Catholic Church in Ireland remind us that we are all on the way, that there is still for all of us a journey of conversion to accomplish, so that our hearts and our communities may be conformed to Christ. In the Preparatory Document published for the Synod of bishops which will end in 2023, we read that one of the main objectives of the Synod is “to convert prejudices and distorted practices that are not rooted in the Gospel” (n. 2), it insists on the fact that “continuous conversion is necessary” (n. 21). The Church is indeed holy but it is also “always in need of purification” (*LG* n. 8).

To refuse to engage in the synodal path is to refuse to be converted, it is to condemn the Church to remain stuck in the mud of our human limitations and weaknesses. Archbishop Haas of Vaduz has decided that his diocese does not need to take part in the process proposed by Pope Francis. This decision reveals a great pride and a harmful complacency. In humility and in truth, we all need to listen anew to what the Spirit is saying to the Church: “Wake up (...) for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God (...) and repent.” (Rev 3:2-3) We may not be as radical as the archbishop just mentioned but we have to be careful not to allow laziness and apathy to prevent us from actively participating in the synodal process.

In his Rule, St Benedict encourages the monks to serve one another because, I quote, “service fosters love” (35:2). The most necessary and useful service we can do to one another in order to grow in love is to listen to one another and to discern together what we need to do for our lives to bear witness to Christ in a more fruitful way.

Let us be humble enough to acknowledge that, over and over again, as persons and as a Church, we need to be converted to love so that, filled with love, we may count nothing too small or too hard to do for God and for our brothers and sisters in humanity.