

The Thirty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 6:2-6
<i>Response</i>	I love you, Lord, my strength.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 7:23-28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Whoever loves me will keep my word, says the Lord; and my father will love him and we will come to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 12:28-34

The Thirty-first Sunday for Ordinary Time in Year B brings us to Jesus' famous teaching about the greatest commandments. This can be found in the Gospel of Mark 12, and that's where we're going to begin today by looking at what Jesus has to say in answer to this question about which of the commandments is first of all. So in Mark 12:28-34, we read these words:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far

from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any question.¹

Okay, so what's going on in this particular passage? There's so much rich teaching here from our Lord, we want to go through it slowly and highlight some elements. Number one, first thing to point out here is the scribe, as I mentioned before in other videos, the scribe was essentially the ancient Jewish equivalent of a biblical scholar. He was somebody who was trained in the study of the law. So you'd have priests who would function in the Temple offering sacrifice, they may or may not be experts in the law, many of them weren't; you'd have Pharisees who were knowledgeable in the law and were kind of authoritative lay people who often lead in the synagogue; but the scribes were particularly known for not just knowing the law but being able to write, they were literate, okay. So they were the scholars and the doctors of the day. And as professors are still to this day, we like to debate things, there was a debate going on and one of the scribes noticed that Jesus was answering the questions well. So he puts to Jesus a very important question, one of the questions that was actually debated in ancient Jewish circles, which is what's the greatest commandment. Now notice the way he articulates this here. Which commandment is first of all.

Now if I asked you as a Catholic, or even any Christian today, what is the first commandment, what you would probably say is I'm the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me; in other words, the first of the 10 Commandments. A good case could be made that the first commandment to worship God and to avoid idolatry is the greatest of the commandments. Or at least, at the very least, you could make the case that it's the first of the commandments because it's the first of the 10 words of God in Exodus 20. So that might be the expected answer, although there were some other answers running around in the First Century A.D. Rabbi Hillel, who was a contemporary of Jesus, a little bit older than him, who's mentioned in the *Mishna*, said that the greatest commandment was do not do to anyone else what you yourself would hate, okay. It's kind of like a negative version of the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

golden rule that we see Jesus himself teach, you know, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's according to later Jewish traditions in the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Hillel taught that as the greatest commandment.

So this is kind of a pressing issue of the day within scribal Jewish circles. So he throws a question out to Jesus and here's how Jesus answers it. First, he says the first commandment is, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Alright, this isn't a very surprising answer on Jesus' part. Some people might think, oh Jesus made up the greatest commandment, you know, he taught us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; that was something new. Well no, Jesus is simply quoting the most famous text from the Old Testament in First Century Judaism. He's quoting a passage called the *Shema*. *Shema* in Hebrew means hear or listen, and it's the first Hebrew word of this famous passage from Deuteronomy 6:2-6. We're going to look at it in just a minute because it's actually the Old Testament reading for today's mass for this Sunday in Ordinary Time. It's a command to love God with all the heart, soul, and strength in the Book of Deuteronomy. The reason it was the most famous passage was because by the First Century A.D., Jewish tradition had established that in order to do your morning prayers and your evening prayers, or even midday prayer — there's some debate about whether exactly that was in place and to what degree — you would recite those verses. You would recite Deuteronomy 6, you would recite the *Shema*, the command to hear, O Israel, that the Lord is one and that you would love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all of your strength. So ordinary Jews three times a day, morning, midday and evening, or at least twice a day, morning and evening, they would recite those verses.

So the analogy I would give to this would be the Our Father. If you ask a lot of Catholics to recite Bible verses from memory, they might be hard-pressed to do it. But if you paid attention at all, you know Matthew 6:9-13, Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, so on and so forth. So the Lord's prayer is a passage of Scripture, and in the same way the *Shema* was a passage of Scripture, but even more than that it was the lived prayer of the Jewish people. I want you to think about this, Jesus himself as a practicing Jew would have prayed the *Shema* three times a day just like the other Jews did. The Blessed Virgin Mary would've prayed the *Shema* three times a day, St. Joseph same

thing. So this is the most well-known Scriptural text of all and that's Jesus' answer to the question what's the greatest commandment.

So that's the context. However, I want you to notice something interesting. Jesus doesn't just quote the Old Testament text, he also adds something to it. This is where it's a little interesting in Mark's gospel, and this is something that's unique to Mark's gospel so we want to pay attention to it. Jesus says that love of God is the greatest commandment, and notice here he gives certain faculties of the human person, certain aspects of human personality, that are utilized in loving God. So let's look at what each of these are. First, he says we shall love the Lord our God with all of our heart, right. The Greek word there is *kardia*, like cardiology is the study of the heart. So this means the heart and, similar to what it means in English, it's the seat of the human will and the seat of the human emotions, okay. So to love God with all of our heart is to love him with all of our will.

Second, Jesus says to love God with all of your soul. Now the Greek word here's a little interesting, it's *psychē* in Greek, we get the word psychology from that. That would normally make you think of the mind, right, so I love him with my heart and I love him with my mind. That's not untrue except that *psychē* in Greek, when it's in a Jewish context, is a translation of a Hebrew word *nephesh*, that means life. So it's a broader term than just your mind, okay. It's the unifying and animating principle of your body, that's what the *psychē* is. It's the spiritual component, so to speak, that holds your body together, animates it, gives it life. So you're loving him with your whole heart, you're loving him with your life, and so I'll skip to the fourth one, Jesus says love the Lord your God with all your strength. The Greek word there is *ischys* and it just means strength, it means your might, your effort. So this is something that requires effort, it requires participation, it's not passive, right. You actually have to do something, you have to engage in order to love God.

Now all three of those elements are in Deuteronomy as we're going to see in a second as we turn back to Deuteronomy, but Jesus adds a fourth and this one's really interesting. He adds that we are to love God with our whole understanding. The Greek word here is *dianoia*, which literally means our thoughts. So notice what he says, to love God with all of our thoughts, with all of our minds. So here Jesus adds this element of loving God with the intellect, of loving God with the mind. Something new is being required, not just that we love him with our souls and our

hearts and our strength but also to love him with our minds. Now what does that mean, to love God with your mind? Well obviously on one level it's going to mean to think about God all the time, right, to devote our mind to him, and we'll come back to what that means a little bit later in the living tradition of the church. For now it's important to note that it would be kind of a striking element of Jesus' parsing of the *Shema* commandment. Now Jesus however, unlike Hillel, he doesn't stop there, he doesn't just limited to one, he adds a second commandment. The second commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Again, sometimes Christians today might fall into the erroneous assumption of thinking this is something new, right. But again, Jesus is just quoting from the Jewish Bible. Here he's quoting everyone's favorite book of the Bible, Leviticus 19:18, which says to love your neighbor as yourself. So Jesus has taken one of the laws of Moses from Deuteronomy and one of the laws of Moses from Leviticus, put them together, these are the two greatest commandments, to love your neighbor as yourself.

Now in this case, why does he do that? Well already by the First Century A.D., in Judaism there's a recognition that these two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, in a sense summarize the two tablets of the Decalogue of the 10 Commandments. So if you look at the first three Commandments, prohibition of idolatry, against taking the Lord's name in vain, and then keeping the Sabbath, those all are commandments oriented toward love of God. Then the second tablet of the 10 Commandments, honoring your father and mother, not killing, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, not coveting your neighbors possessions or wife, all those Commandments are oriented toward love of neighbor. So what Jesus is essentially doing is boiling the 10 Commandments, distilling them down to their essence and their core, and then linking those cores to two passages of Scripture: Deuteronomy 6, love of God, which they would pray three times a day, and then Leviticus 19, love of neighbor, which was not part of that liturgical prayer but which he's bringing to the fore here.

Alright, so that's his answer. How does the scribe respond? By saying this, "You are right, Teacher." I love that line because it kind of sounds like he's saying, you know, Jesus agrees with me or I agree with Jesus, and that's always a good thing to do, to agree with Jesus, right. But you can recognize here that when he says, "You are right, Teacher," he doesn't quite have a full understanding of Jesus' identity yet. He's still kind of just describing him as a Jewish teacher, as a Jewish rabbi, with

whom he happens to agree. But we know that Jesus himself, as we'll see from the rest of the New Testament, is the author of the Decalogue. He is the word made flesh, he is the word who has come into the world not just on tablets of stone but to be written into the human heart itself. So there's kind of a humor in that statement, you are right teacher, insofar as the scribe doesn't recognize yet who Jesus is, that he's the "I Am" from Mark 6, you know, who walked on the water, who made the world. But hey, well you know, Jesus meets us where we are and in this case he wants to commend in the scribe the truth of what he said, because the scribe adds something to it. He doesn't just say Jesus is right about the existence of one God and loving one God as the greatest of all commandments, but he says something else. He says that to love God is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Now I will throw something in here that's important. Notice he mentions whole burnt offerings, well what was a whole burnt offering? A whole burnt offering was a sacrifice where you would not partake of any of the sacrifice. So like a Passover lamb, you offer the lamb on the altar but then you get to eat the lamb, right. The blood is poured out but you get the flesh, you get to eat the roasted lamb. When you did a whole burnt offering, the entire animal would be consumed in the fire on the altar and offered to God. The symbolism of a whole burnt offering was offering yourself to God without remainder, without leaving any part out, whole and entire, right. That's where we get the word holocaust. *Holos* means whole, *caust* is from the word for fire, so something that's entirely burned up. So the supreme sacrifice symbolizing me offering myself entirely to God was a holocaust, a whole burnt offering, and what the scribe is saying here is that even greater than that is loving God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. At the end of the day that sacrifice is meant to symbolize an interior reality of the heart, soul, mind, and strength. So if we are to love God with all of that then it's actually more valuable than all whole burnt offerings or sacrifices.

Now once he makes that leap, when he recognizes that it's the interior movement of the heart and the mind that God ultimately desires, and that that is the most valuable thing, Jesus says something that he says really only to him here. It's a pretty unique response in Mark's gospel, he says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." In other words, you are really close here to the mystery that I've come to unveil, to the mystery of the kingdom that I've come to preach and to

teach, which is about driving the law of God into the human heart, the mind, and the soul, not just engaging in those exterior actions, although they're important, but rather making the interior moments of the heart and mind conform to the exterior worship. So that what is expressed is ultimately what God wants from us, which is our love. That's what this is all about. You can see here it says, "After that no one dared to ask him any question." It's like one of these conferences where you get up and go, and some brilliant scholar just blows...like somebody asked a question and the scholar just blows them away and then it's quiet. You can hear a pen drop because everybody is scared to get up and ask another question. That's what happened, that was how Jesus answered the question. I could have called this, you know, Jesus Q&A, that could have been the title of this week's video.

Alright, so, good Q&A session here from our Lord in Mark 12. Let's go back and look at the Old Testament then. So it's pretty easy to figure out why the church chooses the Old Testament for today because the Old Testament for the day is the *Shema*. It's the passage that Jesus himself identifies as the greatest commandment. So let's read it. Deuteronomy 6:2 and following:

That you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life; and that your days may be prolonged. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

And here's the key verse:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;"

So let's stop there. There are a couple elements here worth highlighting. Notice it begins with the text, with a reference, to fear of the Lord. Now this gets a lot of modern people bent out of shape. I'm not quite sure why, but it does. I think it's just because the word fear in English has come to have a very narrow meaning which

simply means to be afraid of someone doing harm to you, for example, like a kind of terror or trembling. There is an element of that in fear of the Lord because the Lord punishes the wicked; it says that over and over in the Old Testament. Sin has consequences, and the Lord, because he's just, he will punish those who are wicked. But the fear of the Lord has a broader meaning in the Old Testament. It literally means reverence for the awesomeness, the power, and the might of God for his holiness. So the Old Testament over and over again says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In other words, if you don't have any reverence for God you are literally acting irrationally, because if he is the God who made the universe, who made the stars and the sun and the moon and the sky and the seas and the waves and the wind and the tempest, then he is so much more powerful than us. We're little specs, right, of sand in this vast ocean of the universe. Then it's reasonable for us to be awestruck in his presence. It's reasonable for us to be reverent of him. It's reasonable of us to have fear of the Lord, respect for the Lord. And if you want to translate that, this is the role that a father often has in the family, right. The children have a certain reverence and respect for the power and the strength of a father. That's his particular role, because he's the disciplinarian in the family, at least in mine he certainly was. So that idea of respecting your dad, respecting your father, is a kind of human shadow, it's a limited shadow, but it's a reflection of the respect and the awe that we should have toward God the father, who is perfectly just, who is all-powerful and all-knowing.

In any case, so it begins with fear of the Lord. So how do I experience fear of the Lord? Well when we fear the Lord, what Deuteronomy 6 is saying here, then our families are blessed, the land is blessed, our time in the land is blessed. That's what he's trying to tell the Israelites, that if you just live in fear of the Lord you're going to be blessed with the blessings of God. If you are obedient to God, you're going to experience the rewards of living in accordance with his law. That's the other thing about fear of the Lord. A person who disobeys the commandment of the Lord is showing he has no reverence, he has no respect, and he has no fear of punishment or fear of the consequences that sin brings. Which is a foolish thing, it's an irrational thing because sin always, always has a consequence. It always has consequences, and God's role is to teach the people of Israel about those consequences.

So in order to kind of lead them to the fear the Lord, lead them to a right reverence for God, he gives them the commandment known as the *Shema*.

Now this alone should tell you here that fear in that context can't mean like fear of someone who wishes to do us evil, because what he ultimately wants to cultivate in them is not just reverence but love. So he says you will love the Lord your God, notice the three elements, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And here the Hebrew terms are worth highlighting. They're pretty similar to the Greek but they're their own terms, so they have a little bit of a different connotation. *Lebab*, the word for heart, has the same kind of context as *kardia* in Greek, but it's definitely tied to the will, right. So I'm going to love God with all my will, I'm going to choose the Lord, right. Choose this day whom you shall serve. Second, in this case, when it says love the Lord God with your soul, that's that Hebrew word I mentioned earlier, *nephesh*. It means my whole life, the animating force of my body. And then finally strength, *me'od* in Hebrew. Same thing, it's your might, your strength, you're going to put effort into this. It's going to take struggle to love God rather than the world, to obey God rather than disobey. It's not an easy path but it's the one God calls us to for happiness, right.

Then finally notice this last line. The words I command to you this day shall be upon your heart. Here you see a little different connotation of heart. The heart here can also be a symbol for our memory as well. In other words, when I write words into my heart it means that I know them by heart. We have that expression in English, right. If I know something by heart it means I've taken it into myself and I've memorized it. Well that verse was what led the Jews to the tradition of reciting the *Shema* three times a day so that they would have it memorized, they could just call it up, right, from their memory and pray it over and over again at any time because they had written it in their heart. I would just say that this practice of memorizing Scripture, of putting Scripture into our hearts, is something that is very ancient and it's also something very powerful, because when you recite words like that three times a day they're going to actually shape the way you see reality, the way you live each day. It's hard to live in opposition to God and at the same time recite three times a day to love God with all your heart, all your strength, all your soul, right. Does it make sense? Invariably too, when people start to live lives of disobedience, the first thing to go is prayer. The first thing to go is daily prayer. You can just trust me. You can put money on that. Take that to the bank. That's how it works, because

prayer is that living relationship of love with God. Once the relationship starts to dwindle the prayer goes, and especially daily prayer, that's the first place to go, and then disobedience becomes more and more easy to carry out.

So the Responsorial Psalm for today is Psalm 18. What's it about? Loving God:

I love thee, O Lord, my strength.

So it's just this recitation of affirming, singing as a community, the Psalm of love of God.

Okay, in closing then what about the living tradition. Here I'd like to quote a couple of passages from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on this. The first one is just from paragraph 2067 on the role of the commandments and the love of God, and it just reiterates what I said earlier. It says:

The Ten Commandments state what is required in the love of God and love of neighbor. The first three concern love of God, and the other seven love of neighbor.²

Well why does that matter? Well because remember, the 10 Commandments are like the baseline requirement for maintaining a relationship with God, right. If you break one of the Commandments in a grave way you've committed a grave sin, or a mortal sin, and so you've broken that relationship with God. So if I want to stay in relationship with God I need to learn to love him and to love my neighbor. That's what the 10 Commandments are all about. That's why they're so crucial because they kind of sum up those two basic movements.

The second element from the tradition that I thought was interesting for today...it has to do with loving God with our minds. I think, at least in my experience, there are a lot of Catholics who know how to love God with their mouths. In other words, we're very comfortable with vocal prayers like the Our Father or the Hail Mary or the Glory Be, and those are wonderful and great. We have bodies, we have mouths, we have tongues. God has given them to us to praise him and to recite

² CCC 2067

prayers and to express those relationships, just like the Jews did with the *Shema*. However, as an adult you're not supposed stop there. The church also calls us to love God with our minds and Jesus called us to love God with our minds. So the church highlights the way we do that is not just to recite vocal prayer but also to engage in meditation. In other words, taking time to think about the word of God, to ponder his word, to listen to it in quiet and solitude and to reflect on it in our minds. Christianity is not just an emotional religion, it's a religion of reason, it's a religion of the mind. So the Catechism says this about loving God with the mind in paragraph 2705 when it's speaking about meditation. Now I know a lot of Christians will think, well meditation isn't that like Eastern religions? No, Christianity has a tradition of meditation and this is what the church says:

Meditation is above all a quest. *The mind seeks to understand* the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking...

Then it goes on to say:

There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters.

There are different kinds, like Ignation, Carmelite, whatever.

*Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower.*³

So notice that. The Catechism is saying here that Christians should be meditating not occasionally but regularly, because if we don't we're going to come to resemble the first three kinds of soil in the parable of the sower: the rocky soil, the shallow soil, the soil where the seeds are on the path and the birds come and eat it up. So it's dangerous, in other words, not to meditate, that's the negative side. On the positive side, if we want to fulfill Jesus' commandment to love God with all our heart,

³ CCC 2705, 2707

all of our soul, all of our strength and all of our mind, then we need to take time each day to reflect and focus our minds and our hearts on his word.