

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings reinforce the fact that our love for God is expressed through our love for those we encounter in our lives. The Rabbis of old observed that three of the commandments related to God and seven dealt with our relationships with fellow human beings. Their explanation was that we love God by loving the person standing before us.

Exodus 22:20-26 Speaking to Moses the Lord brings to mind those who are easily overlooked in society – the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor and underprivileged. But they are God's own and are not forgotten. 'The Lord hears the cry of the poor' and we find this expressed in many ways in the Hebrew Bible. God expects that 'the least of these' should be treated with care and justice.

While regard for the underprivileged and the defenceless in society was a common concern for the prophets of Israel, it is a fact that humanitarian sensitivity was also reflected in older texts of the Hebrew scriptures. We see here consideration for the newcomer, the *ger* (= stranger) who was a temporary dweller in the land. They should not suffer abuse because they have no line of support, no family connections among the people of Israel.

Notice how the compassion of the Lord is emphasised in this reading

The people of Israel are reminded that they were once strangers in Egypt and were mistreated there. Foreigners and temporary residents cannot fall back on family or clan contacts and have no social or legal protection. People who don't forget their suffering and hard times can afford to show compassion towards those who are enduring difficulties.

The Torah quite strongly condemns mistreating or exploiting the widow and the orphan, probably because it was so easy and beyond the reach of the law. These unfortunates had no one to go into bat for them, but the Lord takes up the cause of the downtrodden.

Do not crush the poor in the gate, for the Lord will take up their cause. Proverbs 22:22-23

Notice how the compassion of the Lord is emphasised in this reading. God dwells in the lofty heights but reaches out to the poor, the broken hearted and the crushed (Isaiah 57:15).

Psalms 18 These psalm verses echo the sentiments of the Exodus reading. The poet has experienced the support of the divine and gladly praise the Lord as his rock and shield who will protect him in all his difficulties. The voice of experience is calling out here. Those who have been lifted up from the depths know what it is like to feel support and revival. And divine support can come by any means. As Jesus said, the Spirit moves wherever it wills, we just have to be open to it with faith and an optimistic outlook.

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10 Last week we read Paul's opening words of encouragement to the community in Thessalonica and today's extract continues in the same vein. He is congratulating the Thessalonians on the enthusiasm they showed in embracing the good news about Jesus Christ. Their community spirit spread and influenced others in northern Greece – Macedonia, and further south in Achaia.

Paul gives credit to the Thessalonians for resisting the pressure from their fellow citizens who saw Christianity as a major break from hallowed Greek traditions. Jewish attempts to attract converts were often met with hostility because they challenged deeply rooted ancestral religious loyalties. Converts to Christianity faced even greater hostility as they turned away from traditional gods and rejected their own family traditions. We do well, in our day, to appreciate something of the personal cost and commitment of these early Christians,

Matthew 22:34-40 This passage represents another occasion where the Pharisees thought they could trap Jesus. It was a general practice for scholars to test each other with riddles. In this case, however, we can detect a measure of bad faith, if not malice in an attempt to succeed with a 'gotcha' question. Particularly since the Pharisees wanted to succeed where the Sadducees failed.

The Pharisees were lay teachers and interpreters of the Jewish law. In addition to the written law they accepted authoritative traditions and interpretations passed down from great names of the past. They also believed in life after death. The Sadducees were a priestly party with connections to the priestly

aristocracy and Temple authorities. They held fast to the written law and were suspicious of the ‘oral law’ of the Pharisees. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

In the verses just prior to today’s reading the Sadducees had tried to gazump Jesus by posing the question of a woman who had seven husbands that all died before her. Whose wife would she be in the afterlife? Jesus calmly outmanoeuvred them by saying that resurrection would not simply be a re-run of earthy relationships. It would involve a wholly transformed mode of existence. This silencing of the Sadducees is what the opening sentence of today’s reading refers to.

The reply from Jesus to the Pharisees spells out the Christian law of love; first by his word for word recitation of the Jewish *Shema* (= hear) and second, by the importance he placed on love of neighbour. The *Shema* reads: *Hear, O Israel:*

The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Arriving at wisdom through reason and reflection was the job of the heart

To break this down a little: love for a king or ruler in the ancient world implied utter loyalty and a deep appreciation of the gifts of the ruler. Love with all our heart means, in Hebrew terms, being connected and dedicated with the centre of our being that makes the body tick. In contrast to the modern notion of the heart being the centre of feelings and emotions, the ancient Hebrew world saw the heart as the centre of life itself and the seat of thought and understanding. This encompassed thinking, understanding, emotions, desires, moral judgment and decision-making. Arriving at wisdom through reason and reflection was the job of the heart.

Soul in Hebrew is *néfesh* which essentially means breath and, by extension, a living being, a living person. Recall in Genesis 2:7 that God ‘breathed’ into the dust and it became a living being (*néfesh*). So, loving God with our ‘breath’ means loving with our whole being, all that we are.

The *Shema* calls for an all-out effort to connect every part of our being to the Almighty

Lastly, loving God with all our *me’od* means bringing all our abundance or muchness to the way we respond to the divine. This amounts to all our strength, our whole capacity, loving with all our resources. The *Shema* calls for an all-out effort, a sustained commitment to connect every part of our being to the Almighty.

Jesus adds to this the command to love others as we love ourselves. Think of it as seeing the other as a dignified human being who is precious in the eyes of God and their loved ones. No one is a nobody; we are all connected. Just think of Dean Martin’s 1947 signature tune of, *Everybody loves somebody*. We are all lovable, and Jesus makes a feature of that in this reading.



Love is energy: it can neither be created nor destroyed. It just is and always will be, giving meaning to life and direction to goodness... Love will never die. Bryce Courtenay



A man ran into the doctor’s office screaming with pain. ‘Please help me. I’ve been stung by a bee.’ The doctor said reassuringly, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll put some cream on it.’ ‘You’ll never find that bee. It must be miles away by now.’ ‘No you don’t understand,’ answered the doctor. ‘I’ll put some cream on the place where you were stung.’ ‘Oh! It happened in the garden in my backyard.’ ‘No!’ said the doctor, getting frustrated. ‘I mean where on your body did the bee sting you?’ ‘On my finger! The bee stung me on my finger.’ ‘Which one?’ the doctor asked. ‘How am I supposed to know? All bees look the same to me!’

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