

Bishop's Reflection – 30th Sunday

There are many different laws and ordinances in the Old Testament. Today's First Reading from Exodus contains only a small sample. Faced with the enormity of God's Law, and even of the Church's teaching, a person may ask, "What is at the root of our faith? What is the underlying principle that undergirds all things?"

Jesus begins by quoting the second part of the Shema (the great commandment), as found in Deuteronomy 6: 4-5. In its fullest form it 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." The Shema is so far beyond any of the other laws contained in Scripture that, in some Jewish traditions, the words of the Shema are the first words whispered in a baby's ears upon birth and the last words whispered in a dying person's ears upon death. The words themselves have an almost sacramental component to them. They are the foundation of Jewish faith.

But instead of simply leaving it there, Jesus goes one step further. He links the greatest and holiest law in Jewish Scripture with one couched among many others in Leviticus 19: 18, thus elevating the second one in status. "And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." In this one combined law all the law and prophets are summarized.

It all begins with God. He is not only the fount of love, He is love in the truest sense of the word. Unless our love is rooted in God's love, our love will always fall short of the mark. But love doesn't end with God; it must, by definition, extend to both neighbour and self, not as a self-serving act, but as a self-giving act.

This is where our First Reading comes into play. God's law, as outlined in the Book of Exodus, is nothing but practical. The proper treatment of widows, orphans and resident aliens are clearly outlined, so are the poor, our creditors and the way we deal with interest and collateral. Remember that you were once an alien people, keep in mind that you, too, may find yourself bereft one day. Keep in mind love's requirements. Do not break ties with God or with your neighbour.

This is what makes Pope Francis' new encyclical, "Brothers (and Sisters) all", so relevant for our world today. Not only does it remind us that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, and have a genuine interest in one another's well-being, we also share one planet and need to look beyond our own borders to appreciate the humanity and the goodness that we share.

This is also what makes coming together regularly on Sunday so important. In a day, when many people have adopted an individualistic view of spirituality, content in finding God in the privacy of their heart, the idea of coming together seems almost foreign, even contrived. What does our gathering on the "Day of the Lord" look like in a Christian community that is widely diverse and far from homogenous? How are we called to build a sense of Christian community that extends beyond the four walls of our buildings, overflowing into the world we live in?

By joining the two greatest commandments into one, Jesus challenges us beyond the private faith that has become all too popular and convenient. It also raises a series of new questions that challenge the minimalism experienced in many of our parishes, where the spirit of gathering falls far short of true fellowship and our outreach is often lacking.