

First Reading Deuteronomy 6:2-6

Moses said to the people: "If you fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and if you keep all his laws and commandments which I lay on you, you will have a long life, you and your son and your grandson. Listen then, Israel, keep and observe what will make you prosper and give you great increase, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you, giving you a land where milk and honey flow.

Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart."

Second Reading Hebrews 7:23-28

There used to be a great number of those other priests, because death put an end to each one of them; but this one, Christ, because he remains for ever, can never lose his priesthood. It follows, then, that his power to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him.

To suit us, the ideal high priest would have to be holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners, and raised up above the heavens; one who would not need to offer sacrifices every day, as the other high priests do for their own sins and then for those of the people, because he has done this once and for all by offering himself. The Law appoints high priests who are men subject to weakness; but the promise on oath, which came after the Law, appointed the Son who is made perfect for ever.

Gospel Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes now came up and put a question to him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to him, "Well spoken, Master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice." Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken, said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to question him any more.

Meditation

How can we find our way through the jungle of the multiple interdicts and commandments of the Law? This is the question a scribe puts to Jesus in all loyalty. From the confession of faith which every pious Jew recites twice a day, Jesus retains first and foremost the commandment to love God. If God is unique, like to none other, the commandment to love him above all is indeed primary.

Jesus also draws the scribe's attention to another commandment. Although it is second, the love of neighbour is, for Jesus, inseparable from the love of God. In fact, it is by charity that humanity resembles God, that we participate in the very life of God. That is the goal of the Law.

There is one unequivocal sign which characterizes those who are not far from the kingdom. It is not their fidelity to religious observance. It is their service of love in its two inseparable faces, God and neighbour.

This saying will quiet those of every age who value the letter of the law above the spirit. It should provoke thought in those institutions where more care is given to order than to love.