



Reflections on the Readings for the 31st Sunday of the Year, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Psalm 17: 2-4, 47-51a; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

The theme of our readings today is that our love of God is to include love of our neighbour. The passage we read from **Deuteronomy** is known as the **Sh'ma** from the command, in Hebrew, "Hear/Listen". It is central in Jewish tradition and liturgy, repeated morning and night, as well as in moments of gravest crisis and at the hour of death. It has sustained every generation of Jews and deepened their commitment to the one saving and caring God. In Torah scrolls the last Hebrew letters of *Sh'ma/Listen* and *Ehad/One* are written large. One explanation given is that, together, these two letters form another Hebrew word, *Aid/witness*, to emphasize that the Jew who pronounces the *Sh'ma* witnesses to the Holy One. When a Jew recites these verses, he/she is said to "take upon him/herself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven", which means that entry into God's kingdom is only possible through selfless, active love - for love is to show itself in deeds: "keep and observe".

We only read a few verses of **Psalm 17**, which is almost identical to 2 Samuel 22. It begins with the words, "I love you, LORD, my strength", which are better translated as "I am impassioned of You, LORD, my strength." Such a translation brings home the depth of feeling that is called for in the **Sh'ma** of Deuteronomy. As the great medieval commentator, Maimonides, says, "What, then, is the way to love God? When human beings contemplate God's works ... they will be seized by a keen longing passion to know God – as David said, 'My soul thirsts for God, the living God' (Psalm 42:3)... The lovers of God experience this constant obsession in their heart, as we are bidden to love 'with all your heart and with all your soul' and as Solomon expressed allegorically, 'I am lovesick' (Song of Songs 5:8)."

The story of Jesus and the scribe is told by all the synoptic gospel writers, but with different emphasis. **Mark's** account, which we read today, is probably the oldest. He says nothing about the scribe wishing to "tempt" or "test" Jesus, but simply reflects a sincere desire to express the whole covenant relationship between God and Israel in a simple all-inclusive statement. It's significant that Jesus appeals to the Torah in his answer: he endorses what the scriptures say. There is no conflict between the commands of God which are set out there and the demands of the gospel. The challenge to love God and to love one's neighbour, once addressed to Israel, is addressed now to Mark's readers and is as appropriate for them as it was for the scribe in the story. The question put to Jesus, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" was one that was commonly discussed by the rabbis. The issue was whether there was some basic principle from which the whole Law could be derived. In reply, Jesus quotes the opening words of the **Sh'ma** – and adds the passage from Leviticus 19:18, "You must love your neighbour as yourself". Certainly they belong together and are held together in the concluding comment: "There is no commandment greater than these." Others among Jesus' contemporaries quoted these passages in reply to similar questions. Rabbi Hillel is said to have taught, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your neighbour; this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary". Mark's account of this story makes an interesting theological point: the teacher of the Law assumes that he is entitled to approve Jesus' teaching, but in fact the roles are reversed, and it is Jesus who approves his.

The living out in all its fullness of this "first of all the commandments" is, of course, seen in the person of Jesus, which is at the heart of the passage we read today from the **Letter to the Hebrews** – "the Son who is made perfect for ever".

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