

Sunday: Ordinary 31b

Spirit Day

Chandros Pattison Auditorium

4 November 2018

Dear brother priests and deacons, dear young people preparing for Confirmation next Spring and dear teachers, parents and volunteers:

Introduction

Before saying a few words about today's Gospel, I would like to thank all of you for taking part in this Spirit Day, so expertly organized by the Archdiocese's Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry, by Clay Imoo, Erwin Fund and Faye McCreavy. I know that they spare no effort in making this day a time for you to celebrate your Catholic faith, to learn more about it, to be with your friends and meet new ones, and to experience what it means to be such an important part of the Church. Your presence here is a real cause of hope for me, for your parishes and schools, and for the Christian community.

The Greatest Commandment

I know that your theme today is "the greatest commandment." The Word of God, which we heard proclaimed in the Gospel, has a lot to say about this. It reminds us that the whole of God's law can be summed up in his desire that we love.

The Gospel with thee question of an earnest religious leader: "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mk 12:28). This was not as easy a question as it seems. Why? because the Law of Moses, which

the Jewish people respected, had 613 commands. How can you pick just one from all of these to be “the first of all”? But Jesus does not hesitate. He responds with confidence.

He cites from the Scriptures, as we heard in the First Reading: “The first is . . . You shall love the Lord your God with your all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mk 12:29-30; cf. Dt 6:4-5).¹ Quite simply, this means we are to love God with every fibre of our being, with everything we’ve got. He is our first love. That means we are to have a profound reverence and affection for him, and to please him above all else.

What is the key word here in Jesus’ response? It is “love.” Loving is, in fact, what we are made for: to be loved and to love. That sums up our calling as Christians. Of course, I don’t mean the fleeting, shallow relationships often portrayed as “love” in our mass media. Rather, I am talking about the real love that is at the very heart of Jesus’ teaching.

¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily (26 October 2008).

More than being a command, love is a gift, one of God's greatest gifts to us. To be able to receive love from him and to give love back to him and to others is what makes us happy. But it is also a gift that, like a seed, is meant to grow within us and develop throughout our life.²

Jesus not only tells us to love in words, but he also shows us by his whole life just what he means by love. How? He treated the crowds with compassion. He fed the hungry with earthly bread and, more importantly, with the Bread of life. He cured the sick and the suffering. And he forgave sinners – and what an act of love that is!

Above all, Jesus' love for us is demonstrated in his willingness to die on the Cross to save each one of us. True love, then, is about making sacrifices. It pulls us out of our selfishness and thinking only about ourselves. A person who loves does not ask, "What's in this for me?" but "What can I do for you?" "How can I help you out?"

One or Two Commandments of Love?

In today's Gospel account, however, something surprising happens. After Jesus finished his answer about the "first commandment of all," he adds something which had not been asked. He said: "And the second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Mk 12:31; cf. Lev 19:18). This, too, was a command already known to the Jewish

² Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (4 November 2012).

people.

Jesus is the first Jew to joins the two commandments together. He united them together, making them inseparable, even while giving love of God priority.³ At the time, this was a novel idea: that the love for God and the love for neighbour are two sides of the same coin. You can't love God, if you don't also love your neighbour.⁴

The Apostle John, who was probably Jesus' closest friend, is very clear about the impossibility of separating these two loves: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). Like his Teacher, Jesus, John emphasizes this same unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour. Love of neighbour is a path that leads to God, and closing our eyes to our neighbour blinds us to God.⁵

Who is My Neighbour?

One further thought arises from the Gospel. Who is the "neighbour" Jesus calls us to love? Whom am I supposed to love?

The answer is simple, even if putting it into practice is often

³ Cf. Leroy A. Huizenga, *Loosing the Lion: Proclaiming the Gospel of Mark* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 262-263.

⁴ Cf. Francis, Angelus (26 October 2014).

⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 16.

difficult: “Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour.”⁶

Who far away is my neighbour? It starts with the person sitting beside you, whom you might or might not know as a friend. Your neighbours are first of all in your family, among your companions at school, boys and girls whom you play with, and even those in far-off lands.

Sometimes it is hard to love those placed nearest to you on your path. It’s much easier to love those you have chosen to be your friends: they like you, and you like them. But if we think about how God loves us – he does so before we can ever love him by creating us– then this tells us something about how we are to love our neighbour.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 15.

When we love God deep down, then we can love even those whom we think don't deserve it, just as God loves us. After all, your father and mother don't love you only when you deserve it. They always love you, though of course, sometimes they have to correct you know when you're doing something wrong.⁷

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (4 November 2012).

Once we understand that we have received God’s love first – he always takes the first step – then, with his help, we can “learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ.”⁸ His friends must my friends – and Jesus excludes no one from his friendship. That’s why, ultimately, everyone is my neighbour.

Conclusion

So, dear boys and girls getting ready next Spring for Confirmation: the greatest commandment is the one that calls us to love. First of all to love God but, at the same time, to care for, to love our brothers and sisters.

In this Holy Mass, we find the strength to love as God loves. He gives us that strength when he gives us himself in Holy Communion. Nourished by this Bread of Life, we truly can love the Lord our God and our neighbour as ourself. That is “the greatest commandment.”

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
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⁸ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.