

THE EMMAUS SERIES

31st Sunday Year B

Deuteronomy 6:2-6

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 12:28-34

There is no commandment greater than these

Jesus approaches the end of his journey. He has already entered Jerusalem when a 'scribe', who is evidently well disposed, asks which is the greatest of the commandments of the Law. As interpreters of the Law, the scribes had listed 613 ordinances calling for observance; it is not surprising that they often discussed their relative importance. This man seeks Jesus' view on the matter. This last exchange Jesus has with the leaders of Israel, in Mark's account, raises an issue important for his disciples. The incident illustrates how Jesus taught with an 'authority' that was different from the approach of the scribes (Mt 7:29). The scribes backed their interpretation by appealing to the authority of recognised interpreters; the response that Jesus gives is backed by his own authority. He underlines the commandment given in today's reading from Deuteronomy, familiar to all faithful Jews as part of their daily prayer: 'You must love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength' – in other words, with your whole being; to love anything in preference to the Lord is idolatry. Jesus is calling his hearers back to the radical faith and trust that so often finds expression in the Old Testament – especially in the prophets and the psalms – a faith and trust that was a true response to the God who had entered into covenant with the chosen people. Jesus goes on, however, to show great originality and wisdom, by linking the 'first' commandment with a 'second': 'You must love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18).

The Covenant was intended to make old Israel 'a light to the nations' – their life, shaped by the ways of God, learned through the covenant relationship, was to be an invitation to all peoples of the earth to find the one, true God – 'The Lord our God is the one Lord' – and the blessings life with God can bring. The Saviour links the two commandments under the rubric of 'love'. The love true believers have for fellow human beings is a love that has been learned from God.

The theme of 'love', so important to every human heart, was soon to emerge, we know, as the very heart of the Gospel, the good news that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son'. (For Paul, 'Love is the fulfilment of the Law', Rom 13:10; as we live 'in Christ', God's own love 'has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit', Rom 5:5. Similarly, according to John, a 'new commandment' rules our Christian life, 'Love one another just as I have loved you', Jn 13:34; indeed, John declares, 'God is love', 1 Jn 4:8). The response of the scribe and the praise it won from Jesus, 'You are not far from the kingdom', point towards this fulfilment. Mark is reminding us that not all the leaders of the people were closed to the message of Jesus. Is it not likely that this scribe was soon to share in the faith inaugurated by the Lord's Paschal Mystery? This faith is interpreted in the reading from Hebrews, where Christ's saving work is compared with the role of priests of the Old Testament. But there is also a great contrast. The old role ended with death, and was compromised by sinfulness. The Old Testament ideal of clinging to God with one's whole being must have seemed a daunting, almost impossible one; now however faith in the Paschal Mystery assures us that the risen Saviour - 'holy, innocent and uncontaminated', and 'made perfect for ever' - gives us a share in his life with the Father.

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