

Commentary to the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

Whoever loves meets God

Introduction



Solitude, silence and asceticism are needed to create a climate conducive to contemplation, “inner life” and encounter with God. However, they will be signs of disease if they distance us from people, if they lead to the neglect of those we live among. The contrast between love for people and the worship of God is founded on pagan myths and not derived from the Gospel.

Friend of humankind, Prometheus, had taught them numbers, letters, the art of domesticating animals, agriculture, navigation and metalwork. He ascended to Olympus to steal fire from the gods and bring it to the people below. For this Zeus had him chained to a rock in the Caucasus and ordered a vulture to eternally rend his flesh. This is how the lord of the gods poured out his grudge against the man who, having benefited people, had antagonized the gods.

Nothing is more contrary to the biblical message. Any promotion, any growth of man realizes God’s plan. “So let us love one another since he loved us first. If you say, ‘I love God’ while you hate your brother or sister, you are a liar. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your

brother or sister who you see? We have received from him this commandment: let those who love God also love their brothers and sisters” (1 Jn 4:19-21). With reason, from a biblical perspective, Prometheus has been called “a man after God’s own heart.” In fact, the Lord has taught his people “that a righteous person must love his human fellows” (Wis 12:19).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Who does not love his brother whom he sees cannot love God whom he does not see.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel-----

First Reading: Exodus 22:20-26

In ancient times there were no embassies to protect citizens residing abroad. Those who, because of war, natural disasters or for work, were forced to abandon their land, their own tribe or clan, often experienced oppression, injustice and wrongdoings. To abuse foreigners, to subject them to heavy and humiliating work, to reduce them to slavery was, in many nations, the usual practice. None of this was in vogue in Israel, where the law severely prohibited injustices against these helpless people. In the Old Testament God often warns: “Do not oppress the stranger” (Ex 23:9). The passage mentioned in today’s reading also adds to the motivation: “Love the stranger then, because you yourselves were a stranger in the land of Egypt” (Dt 10:17-19).

The Israelites felt deeply united with foreigners because, over the centuries, they had repeatedly had the dramatic experience of exile. Their profession of faith begins with a fact: “My father was a wandering Aramean. He went down into Egypt to find refuge there” (Dt 26:5).

The recommendation of the reading “not to wrong or oppress a stranger” is the result of a complaint of discrimination arising from those belonging to a different race, ethnic group or even different social group. Then it continues: “You shall not harm the widow or the orphan ...” (vv. 21-23). Again we are faced with unprotected persons: the wife without a husband and children without parents easily become victims of abuse. In their defense God stands up, “father of orphans and protector of widows” (Ps 68:6), who “protects the stranger, sustains the widow and the orphan” (Ps 146:9).

How does one take care of these people? First of all, giving his people provisions such as this: “When you harvest the wheat in your fields, if you drop a sheaf, do not return to pick it up, but let it be there for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. When you harvest your olives, do not go back to beat the trees another time, what is left shall be for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, do not return to look for what has been left. This will be the share of the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt” (Dt 24:19-21).

About this rule, the rabbis observed: all the other commandments were given by the Almighty because you knowingly observe them, but this is a precept that we fulfill unconsciously. Letting the farmer

forget something, the Lord feeds the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

To abuse these helpless people is to provoke the wrath of God. Applying the principle of ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,’ He promises to let the culprits die by the sword, making their wives widows and their children orphans (v. 23).

The choice of the sacred author to ascribe to the Lord the practice of the law of retaliation is extremely bold. The image, however, is effective: it serves to inculcate the idea that the God of Israel is not like the pagan gods who rejoice at the scent of incense and are placated by burnt offerings. He is the avenger (to be clear—it is just an image!) of the poor and the oppressed. “Oppression of the weak—the sages of Israel say—insults their creator” (Pro 14:31).

The reading continues with the prohibition of lending at interest (v. 24). The Hebrew word that we translate as ‘interest’ is *néshek*, which literally means bite. It is easy to understand why the Lord—who defends the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor (Ps 140:11)—repeatedly and harshly condemns any loan of money or goods for a fee. “If your brother becomes poor and is unable to support himself, help him. Help this stranger or this guest that he may live with you. Do not take interest from him, but fear your God, so that your brother may live among you. Do not give him your silver at interest nor your food for gain. I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (Lev 25:35-38).

Finally, the last case is moving: The poor man who, in order not to starve, is forced to hand over his cloak in pledge (v. 25). It was a sleeveless cloak with rounded edges that was stuck over his head. The poor man carried it with him everywhere, as the only coverage. God states that, before evening, it is to be returned to him, without any conditions. Otherwise he would have nothing to wrap himself with when he goes to bed. If deprived of his cloak, during the night the poor would groan because of the cold. I—says the Lord—would listen to his moan, would lend ear to his request for help and would intervene in his favor, for I am gracious.

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10

The birth and development of the community of Thessalonica confirm that the power of God is present and operates, through the preaching of the Gospel (1 Thes 1:5ab). Then Paul declares that his blameless life, that of Silas and Timothy gave an important testimony in favor of the authenticity of the Gospel message (v. 5c).

The Thessalonians became imitators of the three apostles and shared their courage and steadfastness in the face of attacks by the forces of evil. They also, in turn, became models for the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (vv. 6-7).

At this point Paul gets carried away with joy and enthusiasm, and in hyperbolic form, expresses his deep appreciation for the community of Thessalonica: “The faith you have in God has become news in so many places that we need say no more about it” (v. 8).

The last part of the passage (vv. 9-10) describes the conversion of Christians at Thessalonica. They were pagans, who had rendered worship to inert and false idols. Now they have turned away from evil

and have approached the one true God and Giver of life. Having chosen to follow Christ, they need not fear the future judgment that the Lord will pronounce on them. It will certainly be favorable, as it is now to the Apostle.

Gospel: Matthew 22:34-40

The rabbis of Jesus' time, studying the Bible, had come to discover 613 commandments, 365 (such as days of the year) of which were negatives, i.e. forbidden actions, and 248 (like the limbs of the human body) were positive, namely, works to be done. The women were required to observe only the negative precepts. Poor "catechists"! Explaining a commandment per day, it would take almost two years to teach them all. In the end, the earlier ones would certainly have been forgotten. If it was hard to learn them, imagine how complicated it was to observe them; to avoid sins was virtually impossible. The common folks were not able to learn the subtle distinctions and endless moral casuistry and were despised by the scribes: "Only these cursed people, who have no knowledge of the Law," as referred to by Caiaphas (Jn 7:49).

Jesus considers this variety of rules a heavy yoke which oppresses and tires, takes the breath away and the joy of living (Mt 11:28). "A curse is on you—He warns the teachers of the law—you prepare unbearable burdens and load them on the people" (Lk 11:46).

One day one of these scribes, perhaps a little affected, approaches Jesus in a hostile manner, and to tempt Him, he asks: "What is the great commandment in the law?" (v. 36). He means to say: all the 613 precepts are great and important and must be observed with the utmost care. They are a yoke, but "it is good for a man to bear the yoke from his youth" (Lm 3:27). How dare, then, call them "unbearable burdens", perhaps you mean to cancel part of the law (Mt 5:17-20)?

Not all rabbis were so rigid. Many made a distinction between serious and light precepts. They also felt the need to make a summary, to find one that would unify them. The text which they referred to was the famous Shema' Israel that every day, morning and evening, every Israelite recited. Jesus Himself quotes: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all might" (Dt 6:5).

There were also those who put love of neighbor in the first place. It is said that one day Hillel—a famous rabbi who lived a few years before Christ—was asked to teach the whole Torah in the time that he could stand on one leg. Hillel replied: "What you do not like, don't do to your neighbor! This is the whole Law; the rest is commentary."

Philo, the Jewish philosopher and man of letters, a contemporary of Jesus, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, felt that the whole law was summed up in the Ten Commandments, and that this in turn could be summed up in love to God and neighbor.

So was there no novelty in the response of Jesus?

Let us look at His words. The great Commandment, the first, is the love of God, that must involve three faculties: the heart, the soul and the mind.

God, first of all, is to be loved with an undivided heart (with all the heart). Today we speak of believers and atheists, but in biblical times this distinction would make no sense because atheists did not exist. Discrimination was between believers and idolaters, among those who loved the living and true God, and those who were entrusted to the dead and misleading gods. Today there are believers, people in the church, who fulfill all religious practices, but at the same time worship their bank account, social position, honorary titles, career, power and their ambitions. They have indeed a “divided heart”, they do not love with all their heart, as Jesus claims.

With all life (soul). The believer is required to have the willingness to sacrifice everything (money, interest, emotional ties and rights), and even the courage to face martyrdom, while not failing in his/her faith. Loving God, trusting him can lead to — and it happens often — the need of making choices and heroic sacrifices. In this case, it is not permissible to resort to subterfuge and misinformation. Compromising solutions cannot be accepted for themselves, nor suggested to others.

With all your mind. Even the rational aspect is part of the love of God. Emotions cannot be the object of a commandment. It may instead be the requirement to employ all the intellect in search of the Lord and of His will. Anyone interested in futility, who spends more time with frivolous arguments, who gossips about celebrities rather than studies the word of God, who ignores the theological and moral issues today, who does not undertake to investigate the reasons of his/her faith, is less involved in the love of God.

So far there is nothing new with regard to the Jewish faith, if not for the fact (essential for a Christian) that the discovery God’s face and His will passes through the Revelation that comes from Christ and the love of God is the fruit of the gift of His Spirit.

After having stated what is the greatest commandment, Jesus adds that this is also the first. He makes this specification to introduce the second, which is like the first: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 39), and here the more apparent novelties begin.

The qualification of “similar”—*homoia* in Greek—means equally large, equally important. It is equal to giving the same value to people as that of loving God. Only Jesus has placed the two commandments on the same level, giving both equal value.

In the above-mentioned response of Hillel, we certainly felt the call addressed by Jesus to His disciples: “So, do to others what you would that others do to you; there you have the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12). We certainly noticed the difference: Jesus has positively turned (do...) the recommendation that Hillel negatively formulated (do not do...). The Master has been inspired by the reflections of the wisest among the rabbis to communicate the full light of His message.

With reference to the commandment of love of neighbor, He has also used the same procedure. He referred to—as the rabbis—a biblical text often quoted: “Do not seek revenge or nurture a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). He gave the precept a new perspective, a boundless dimension. For the Israelite “neighbor” meant the children of his people; Jesus is for every person, even the enemy (Mt 5:43-48).

The concluding statement: “The whole Law and the Prophets are founded on these two

commandments” (v. 40), must be interpreted, therefore, bearing in mind similar expressions used by the rabbis. These two commandments are the point of reference for any rule. They should be taken as criteria for evaluating every precept. All laws are good if they are an expression of love. They should be rejected if they oppose it, because they are a hindrance to the good of the people.

There remains one final point to clarify: the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor.

We note that in the authors of the New Testament, there is a progressive tendency to unify the two commandments. Mark, the first of the Evangelists, speaks of the first and of the second commandment. After him, Matthew retakes the same expression, but adds: the second is similar, that is, equal to the first. Luke does not mention a first and a second commandment, but combines them into one (Lk 10:25-28). John records the words of Jesus who speaks of only one commandment: “Now I give you a new commandment: Love one another! Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

Later, and throughout the rest of the New Testament, there is no emphasis on two commandments, but only on one, love of people. “For the whole law—Paul reminds us—is summed up in this sentence: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14). Writing to the Romans, he recommends: “Do not be in debt to anyone. Let this be the only debt of one to another: Love. The one who loves his brother or his neighbor fulfilled the law. For the commandments, Do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not covet and whatever else are summarized in this one: You will love your neighbor as yourself. Love cannot do the neighbor any harm; so love, fulfills the whole Law” (Rom 13:8-10).

We know what it means to love others, even though it is not always easy to determine how this love can be made concrete. But how do we love God? If one continues to keep the two commandments separated, one runs the risk of putting God and the neighbor in competition and of thinking that they contend for the heart of man, his time, thoughts and interests. In such a situation, that which is given to one is removed from the other. Loving God means not subtracting something from man to give it to God. The pagan gods were the ones who had created people to be served by them through offerings, sacrifices and prostrations. The God of Jesus has never asked for anything for Himself. He puts Himself at the service of man, even to bending down to wash his feet and asks us to do the same: “If such has been the love of God—John says—we too must love one another” (1 Jn 4:11).

Loving this God means to assimilate His feelings towards people; it means to love the orphan, the widow and the stranger, as God loves and protects them.

The connection between the two commandments had been noted by various rabbis. Someone, however, has also realized the reason why they support one another. It is a sublime reason we make our own: the love for people is still love turned to God, because it is directed to His image (Gen 1:27)