

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary time

If I asked you what it meant to love your husband or to love your wife what might you say to me? If I asked you what it meant to love your son or your daughter, what would you say to me? I suspect that you would not find it easy to describe what it means to love your spouse or to love your children. You would probably want to start to list some of the things that you do to show your love for the members of your family. Most of those things you would not even think about unless you were asked to list them. They are just part of how you relate to those you love.

The people of Israel had a very close relationship with the God who had called their father Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees. They treasured the way that that relationship was governed by the law that had been handed down to them through the Prophet Moses. This law not only described how they were to relate to God, but also how they were to relate to one another. Over time that law became very extensive and there was something to say in the law about almost every aspect of daily living. By the time of Jesus there were some 613 different laws that the faithful people of Israel needed to obey. It became very difficult to keep track of them all. It was not surprising then that many people were trying to sort out which laws were more important than others. It was not surprising that one of the

Pharisees asked Jesus the question, “Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?”

As we listen to this question in Matthew’s gospel we notice that it is asked in the context of the opposition that the Jewish leaders had with Jesus. But as Jesus so often does, he moves beyond any controversy to describe the heart of the Jewish Law. “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment.” Jesus was not saying anything new. He was quoting something from the Book of Deuteronomy that the devout Jew recited three times a day. It was written on a piece of parchment inside a box that was worn on the forehead of the devout Jew.

But not everybody would have linked that commandment with what Jesus went on to say. “The second resembles it: you must love your neighbour as yourself.” Again, Jesus was not saying anything new. He was quoting from the Book of Leviticus. What Jesus had to do at another time was to expand his hearers vision of who their neighbours were. I suspect that you and I still struggle with that. We all like to draw a line around those we are called to love.

We notice that Jesus says that the law to love our neighbour as ourselves resembles the law to love God

with all of our being. In other parts of the New Testament, especially in the letters of St. John and St. James, it is made very clear that we cannot choose to love God or love our neighbour. We cannot do one without the other.

When we look again at the Gospel we notice that Jesus has added. “On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets also.” We have to be careful how we interpret that. If we look first at the community for which Matthew wrote his gospel, we find that they were mainly Jewish people who had become Christians. For as long as they could they continued to worship in the Temple and in their local synagogues. They continued to live by the Jewish Law that had been handed down to them. What Jesus and Matthew are saying to them was not to abandon the Law, but to keep grounding the Law in their love of God and love of neighbour. Everything they did needed to be in tune with those two commandments. They needed to keep asking themselves why they were doing what they were doing. Is it to show my love for God? Is it to put into practice the love I have for my neighbour?

I think this is what you and I can also draw from this gospel. It is easy to think that Jesus simplified everything and told us that we just have to live by the Law of Love. We don't have to think about Laws

anymore. We just have to love people. But is that really what Jesus said? He certainly did spend quite a bit of time criticising those who used the Law to avoid their responsibility to love. But he knows that loving is not just thinking nice thoughts about others. Loving is not something we do in the abstract. Loving is putting the other person first and choosing to do things that make that happen, no matter what it may cost us.

This is not the same as blindly following a set of laws that we have inherited. It is not the same as using laws to make life easier for ourselves. Pope Francis is a great example of someone who practices the law with great love. At one of his weekday Masses recently he said that we are called to understand the revelation of God as a way of understanding God's heart, God's salvation. He was critical of those pastors in the Church who did not reveal the mercy of God. “I have heard several times of parish priests who did not baptise the children of mothers because they were not born in canonical marriage. They closed the door, why? Because the heart of these parish priests had lost the key of knowledge.” He concluded his homily on that day by saying, “The Pharisees, doctors of the law are not people of the past, even today there are many of them. That is why we need prayers for us shepherds. To pray that we do not lose the key to knowledge and do not close the door to ourselves and the people who want to enter.”