

Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Many people who take very little interest in horse racing will be placing a bet on the horse that they think will win next Tuesday's Melbourne Cup. If you asked any of them which is the greatest day of horse racing in Australia almost all would say Melbourne Cup Day. Maybe this year many would be thinking back to last week when Winx won her fourth Cox Plate. But those who understand racing better than I do, would usually say that the greatest day of horse racing in Australia was yesterday, Derby Day. My father who knew a bit about horses, said to me once, "You go to the Cup to see the best hats. You go to the Derby to see the best horses."

The scribe who asked Jesus which of the commandments was the greatest, may not have known anything at all about horse racing, but he knew a lot about the law. And he could appreciate that Jesus knew a lot about the law too and had touched into the heart of the law when he placed side by side the two commandments: to love God with all of our being, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The first of those commandments was found in the Book of Deuteronomy. We read it today as part of our first reading. It was so central to the life of the devout Jew that many Jews wore it either on their forehead or on their arm in a little scroll. It was called the Shema, from

the first Hebrew word of the commandment, Shema Israel, Listen Israel. That preface to the commandment to love God with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength is worth noticing. It is because there is only one God that we devote all of our energy towards loving that God. We cannot love the one God with a divided heart. The second commandment was from the Book of Leviticus. Jesus places the two commands together because he wanted us to understand that loving God commands us to love our neighbour.

In St. John's first letter, he puts it very plainly. "Anyone who says "I love God" and hates his brother, is a liar, since one who does not love his brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has never seen."

Even if we can say yes to all that, we know that it is not easy to do it. We can tolerate other people, avoid causing them harm, even respond to some of their needs. But to love them as we love ourselves is something quite demanding, and it may seem to be too difficult most of the time. Something deeper happens when we try and do that. We begin to understand that we need our neighbor as much as they need us. We sense that when we forgive other people then it is our own sins that we forgive. When we pity them, it is because we ourselves need pity. When we love others as we love ourselves, we are trying to love them with a deep respect for the people that they

are. We love them not from a position of superiority, but we make ourselves vulnerable so that God's love for the other person may flow through us to the other in the way that God wants that to happen. Loving another as we love ourselves is opening the door to allow us to love the other person as God loves them.

Before we go any further, perhaps we need to stop and ask ourselves how well we love ourselves. Some people find it very difficult to see anything beyond their own faults. They don't think of themselves as very lovable, and so cannot easily love themselves. If we are like that, then maybe our prayer today could be for the grace to see ourselves more and more as Jesus sees us. We could ask for the grace to imagine ourselves as the person that Jesus loves. Time and time again in the gospels we see how Jesus never dwells upon the faults of those he meets but sees what those people can be as loved by him. He imagines their potential, what they can become. Think of Matthew. Did Jesus see him as an unjust tax collector or a disciple and the author of the first gospel? Did Jesus see Mary Magdalene as a prostitute or the one who would stand by him at the cross and be the first witness to the Resurrection? Did Jesus see Peter as the one who denied him or as the one sent to feed his sheep? Jesus sees us in the same way. And it is when we see ourselves as loved by Jesus that we can begin to understand how lovable we are.

Loving God and loving our neighbour are so intertwined because they are part of the same mystery. It is because we are loved by God that we can love God in return. It is because we are loved by God that we can love another person.

Prominent people in our society are sometimes asked who the greatest influence upon them has been. Quite frequently they name their parents or their spouses as the ones who have influenced them the most. I suspect that they do that because they have been the ones who have loved them most and have taught them that they are lovable. When someone knows that, then they know that they can do anything for good. And when we know that we are loved and have found the source and fountain of that love, then we can keep loving no matter how dry and empty we may feel.

I often find myself at weddings reminding couples that love is a gift from God. It is when we are open to that gift of God's love for us that we discover that we have love enough to share with the ones we are called to love and give our life to. Trusting in God's love for us may we live out that mystery this week.