

HOMILY SUNDAY 31 – B (Homily 03)  
“Living the Great Command”  
(Dt 6:2-6; Psalm 18; Heb 7:23-28; Mk 12:28-34)

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A young girl was praying kneeling by her bed head bowed, reciting the alphabet. When asked by her mother why she was doing that, she replied sweetly that she was praying but couldn't think of what to say, so she decided to say all the letters of the alphabet and God could put them together however he thinks best.

The readings today invite us not just to pray, but to put together prayer and action, to live the Great Commandment of Jesus through love of God, others, ourselves and all of God's creation.

The first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy put forward the Great Shema, or command, that was to be observed in the Promised Land, which for us today would be the reign of God. The result of observing and living this Shema would be a life of awe, reverence and length of years. The Shema underscores that the Israelites were to love God with their whole being, that this was meant to be the single most important priority in their lives. They were to teach it to their children, who were expected to memorize it, even wear it in amulets, as their single most important guide through life.

Today's Gospel opens with a surprising stance of a scribe towards Jesus, in start contrast to the usual strained hostile stance they had towards him. This scribe appreciates Jesus' wisdom and asks a sincere question. Jesus answers with the usual Shema from our first reading, and then very deliberately lifts out of Leviticus 19 one of many prescriptions of the Torah and puts it on an equal footing as the first. This was unheard of for the Jews of Jesus' day – a radical departure from the usual teaching.

The scribe's sincere, open attitude continues in his response to Jesus. He appreciates the insight of Jesus and understands the spirit of the command as Jesus put it, that heartfelt faith expressed in love is much superior to following rules and regulations or offering sacrifices. He caught the message that love of and trust in God through worship, prayer and meditation must be expressed and balanced by loving acts towards others and one's self. It is safe to say that the complete command really amounts to loving God with

our whole being, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and loving or caring for all of God's creation.

The result of the scribe's stance is that he is close to living in the reign of God which Jesus came to establish here on earth. That coincides with the motto of the fifth archbishop of our archdiocese – *Regnum Dei Intra Vos* – The Kingdom of God is among you.

Gerald May, a spiritual writer and psychologist, would put it this way: we are to be willing, open to doing God's will in all we do, rather than wilful, or stubbornly following our own will, which actually can take us out of or away from the reign of God.

It is good to emphasize the call to balance both commandments, to avoid establishing polarities between the two. Love of God alone can lead to a rigid fundamentalism, or even terrorism, such as suicide bombers who kill themselves and countless others in the name of Allah. Love of others alone can lead to activism and workaholicism, to doing one's own will in God's name, rather than doing God's will. It can lead to policies that are amoral, or even immoral, such as abortion, or the view that the Church has no place in the bedrooms of the nation.

In the end, the scribe "got it", and was able to reflect back to Jesus his own teaching. He especially understood how love was greater than any sacrificial offering, rule or regulation, a main point of contention between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees.

A saying of Mother Theresa of Calcutta fits here: "What you want to do to Jesus whom you cannot see, do to the person next to you, whom you can see, and you will be doing it to Jesus."

The second reading from Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the high priest who forever intercedes for us. He saves those who approach God through him. Jesus is the way and the gate to the Father; we enter through him. Saint Theresa of Avila was strong on this point. She writes that we are to never take our eyes off Jesus in our spiritual path; that we are to keep focused on him and walk in a right relationship with Jesus, as the only way to the Father.

The Eucharist that we celebrate is in itself a living out of the Great Commandment of Jesus. We have gathered to love God back with our whole

being through worship in spirit and truth. We love ourselves by opening ourselves up to the forgiveness and healing power of God. We are gathered in fellowship to love and care for one another, and then we are sent out to love and care for all those we meet.

May our celebration today help us love God with our whole being, love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and find Christ in the least and weakest among us.