

Year B, Proper 26, 31.10.2021, Mark 12.28-34

Which is the first of all the commandments?

May the words of my mouth...

Following on from last Sunday's gospel in which Bartimaeus has his sight restored by Jesus I want to locate where we are today in Mark's gospel with Jesus, the scribe and others. The scribe who asks Jesus, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Last Sunday we left Jesus, Bartimaeus and the crowds in Jericho about to ascend to Jerusalem for the Passover the great festival of the Hebrew people in which they recall how God freed them from Pharaonic slavery. Estimates of how many people gathered for the Passover in Jesus' time vary, but we are speaking about several hundreds of thousands.

The same day Jesus after having made the ascent to Jerusalem enters the city in the late afternoon / early evening, where he is welcomed with Hosannas and expectations that connect him to a Davidic promise that God will raise up for the Hebrew people a king from David's descendants. After entering Jerusalem Jesus and his disciples go straight to the Temple to look around. They retire to Bethany for the night. The next day they return to Jerusalem and the Temple, where Jesus drives out those who are selling and those who are buying reminding the people of words from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations...".

Once again Jesus retires to Bethany only to return to the Temple the next day to be questioned. First by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. Who ask, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you authority to do them?" They remain unspecific saying "these things" and "them". Are they referring to the whole of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing or simply to what happened in the Temple the previous day? After retiring they send Pharisees and Herodians to ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? These are followed by some Sadducees, who ask a trick question about the resurrection. Finally, we arrive at today's text in which a scribe, overhearing Jesus' answers to the above groups, asks what on the surface is a straightforward question. "Which is first of all the commandments?"

Given the above we can see that today's gospel has a context. It is the fourth and the last of four questions to Jesus. Mark ends this sequence in his gospel stating, "After that no one dared ask him a question." It is a puzzling conclusion especially if we don't have an eye for what has gone on before. And one more thing before we proceed. We even have a good idea of where these exchanges took place: on the Temple Mount as Jesus was questioned from reference elsewhere. Jesus stood in what is known as Solomon's portico with pilgrims milling around, thousands of them, while the various sacrifices were being made. It was busy and noisy place full of smells...

We have worked hard to build up a picture of the day, time and place in the last days of Jesus's life. It is into this space that a scribe, a lone person, comes forward with his question having observed that Jesus – responding to the chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees, together representing most of the Hebrew strands of the time – had answered them well. This lone scribe asks, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" How many of us would ask that question of Jesus, if we were each allowed a question? What would your question be?

A scribe was one who copied the texts of the various scrolls. He would have been familiar with the Hebrew writings. Because he could read and write he belongs to an elite. Estimates vary, but at most 15 % could read and write. He may have had teaching responsibilities. It will take some 18 centuries for universal education to begin its ascendancy. In 1820 only 14% of the world's population could read and write. Today only 16 % can't read or write, but illiteracy is on the increase.

A number of us have watched the Israeli TV series Shtisel on Netflix enjoying it immensely. There we are given a picture of Torah scholar, who devote heart, soul, mind and strength to studying the Hebrew Scriptures, the Talmud and the Mishnah, as developed by Rabbinical Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, which up to its destruction was the focal point of Jewish religious, familial and national identity. The picture drawn in Shtisel affords us, I think, a helpful picture of the devoted scribe of Jesus' day, who must not be distracted from his studies. This scribe although associated with the Temple sees its limitations, putting God's written word as captured in the Law over the practise of Temple sacrifices, "this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices." Just think where the scribe makes his statement. He says it in the Temple precinct, where the people have come to make

their offerings as minutely prescribed in the Book of Leviticus and to Leviticus we will return, sensing the prevailing tensions within the Hebrew religion of the time.

Now with all the above in mind let's dig deeper. The scribe who has been listening asks his question, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus gives him the answer one might have expected, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He expands his answer drawing on the Book of Leviticus. Remember the Book of Leviticus details all sacrifices, the grain offerings and the burnt offerings, so he is not colluding with the scribe. Given the need to understand Jesus' offering, his sacrifice, we need some understanding of what the Temple sacrifices were intended to achieve. They were to be an expiation for sin. Expiation means "the act of making amends or reparation for guilt or wrongdoing; atonement." The sacrifices were offered to make the people righteous, that they may serve God well in their daily lives. If you want to be right with people, you need to be right with God. Our reading of the letter to the Hebrews over the last weeks may have alerted us to the importance of understanding the limitations of the Jewish sacrificial system. Last week we heard,

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever. (Hebrews 7.26-28)

Back to Jesus' answer. The scribe only asks for the first and most important commandment, but Jesus provides him with the second one as well. These two are inextricably linked. If you say A, you must say B. You can't have one without the other, as Frank Sinatra sings in Love and Marriage. Jesus never loses sight of the people. Any turning to God turns us to life in all its fullness. Life is always gift. Life is always precious until our dying breath. Here in Austria and in the UK bills are being drawn up to legalise assisted suicide, assistierter Suizid. For Christians our commitment to life as a gift from God informs, shapes and directs our engagement with this present day topic with which Caritas and Diakonie in Austria in particular are grappling from a Christian perspective.

Our turning to the living God turns us to all made in his image “in love” however little or much we love. Love so easily referenced and preached, so little lived. Of the woman whose many sins are forgiven Jesus says, “She loved much.” May we like her learn to love much. May we become like her knowing ourselves forgiven, made righteous by Christ’s sacrifice. What I must warn against is uncoupling the commandment to love your neighbour from loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. There is a 20th century prayer that reverses the order by putting love and service to man before love and service to God. God thereby becoming an addendum reflecting well where we have arrived “as man has frighteningly become of age”. We need first to know at any given moment what it means to love God and serve God in our daily lives, before we can give order and shape to serving and loving others in his name. The first commandment is as Jesus says and which the scribe confirms, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Remain firmly moored, firmly anchored lest you lose your mooring...

It is clear in my mind that we can only know how best to serve creation and our neighbour, if we first serve God. Our service must always be determined by giving attention to the first commandment, knowing that it will inevitably turn us to the second. Otherwise we very quickly become self-serving. Linking our service of man to our service of God as God has made himself known is paramount. It might be helpful to consider one of the Roman gods of mythology: Janus, who with his two faces is always looking in opposite directions simultaneously.

The scribe is right in his answer, but something follows. Love of God is inextricably caught up with the love of neighbour. When Christians speak of love Christ becomes our measure. Remember this gospel text is a discourse about the first commandment. Jesus however not only drawing on Deuteronomy and Numbers, but also on Leviticus, where we find the love of neighbour as yourself commandment buried, then adds the second commandment, so they are inextricably linked forever. The second is not **like** the first, which I think is off the mark, it is the second. Getting love of God right, putting this love first inevitably leads us back to the love of neighbour of which **we** are no longer the measure, given that so many cannot love themselves, but Christ. He is our measure. I cannot make myself the measure of what love is, but must look to Christ, the Christ who ascends the cross, for the love of the world. Before whom we bend the

knee. Before him angels prostrate fall. I turn to Maundy Thursday the day after today's gospel where according to John's gospel Jesus says, "I give you a New Commandment; love one another as I have loved you." Elsewhere Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Jesus Son of David, teacher, healer, lawgiver, to whom we come today with our questions, let us never be parted from you that we may give ourselves in love and service to you and one another. **Amen.**