

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading

(Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-8)

'Hear, O Israel'

This reading is very special: it is the command that rules Israel's life, and the life of every true Christian. The faithful Jew recites this passage morning, noon and night, and in prayer carries the text literally before the eyes, on the hands and on the doorposts of the house, so that one is always aware of the most important loyalty in life. This is a symbol that love of God must dominate all our actions and thoughts; it must be always in our minds and thoughts, and must be the guide of all our deeds and motivations. God is a God of love and warmth of the heart, not a God of threats or compulsion. To serve God is a joy and happiness, bringing light and colour into our lives.

If God is not in our lives and thoughts, we are the poorer for it, and lack not only truth but also the warmth of an unspeakable, personal friendship. The only difference the New Testament brings, as St Paul explains, is that for Christians there is not merely one Lord God. For us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come.

Question:

What would life be like without God?

Second reading:

(Hebrews 7.23-28)

The Perfect High Priest

The pagan idea of sacrifice was to make reparation to a demanding and often angry god, to divert a capricious god from our own failings by flattery and gifts. The blood of the victim that was shed was a substitute for human blood, paying the price for a life which should have been forfeit.

The Christian idea is entirely different. Christ is the perfect human being who is also divine, united to his Father in a perfect and permanent act of love. This reached its highest expression in the offering of his life in loving obedience. It was not a barbaric act of paying a penalty that I should have paid, but a return in tender love in which I may share. Christ still remains with or before the Father in this permanent, timeless act of loving obedience or loving embrace, accepted and vindicated by the Father in the Resurrection, which raises Christ onto a new plane of existence in God.

The Letter to the Hebrews, written for Christians of Jewish origin who still hankered after the rituals of the Temple, makes clear that Christ's offering is the perfect fulfillment of all the objectives and devotion imperfectly expressed in the rituals of the Temple.

Question:

What is the basic difference between pagan and Christian sacrifice?

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Gospel:

(Mark 12.28-34)

The Great Commandment

The basic command of Judaism, which should dominate all life was love of God above all things. Jesus audaciously adds to this another commandment of the Old Testament, the love of neighbour. This is the only case in the gospels where a scribe positively approves Jesus. Why is this the case?

The scribes were the experts in the law and its interpretation. To stress the importance and the equality of the second commandment of love, Jesus uses a technique of interpretation common and approved in Israel. If the same words are used, you may set two passages of scripture on a level with each other. In these two commandments, and only here in the whole of the Bible, are the words used, 'And you shall love ... ' with a direct object. This enables Jesus to put the command on the same level - and the lawyer approves his interpretation. The first Letter of John puts it: 'No one who fails to love the brother whom he can see can love God whom he has not seen.' This was, of course, not a new commandment; it was the equality of the two commandments of love that was new in the teaching of Jesus.

Question:

What sort of person do you find it most difficult to love?
