

My dear people of God, today, we are meditating on the greatest commandment of all, namely, **love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself**. According to Jesus, love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated, and anyone who tries to separate these two loves is bound to fail in his or her Christian life. Confer first John 4:20 "If anyone says 'I love God' but hates his brother or sister, he or she is a liar". The fact is that our love of God should reflect on our love of neighbor. Let us love not only in word or speech, but also indeed and in truth (1 Jn.3:18). Let us focus on the readings.

In our Gospel reading, we heard that one of the Scribes...seeing that Jesus has answered them well came and asked him, "which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus answered, 'the first is "Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and 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. The second is this, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mk.12:29-31). Jesus's answer to him is made up of a combination of two quotations: first, Dt 6:5 ('you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'); and, second, a part of Lev19:18 ('you shall love your neighbor as yourself'). The Evangelist **wants to show that this love of neighbor that Jesus preached was far more demanding than anything that was normally expected as part of the law. For Jesus, neighbor means anyone of any nation who is in need regardless of his/her status in life or religion or race.**

Our first reading from Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, is an iconic passage for the Jewish people. This passage forms part of Jewish prayer and devotion and, therefore, very important to them that they nail it to their doors and at times even wear little containers with this passage on their foreheads. This is what Moses has to say, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." The passage from Deuteronomy begins, "Hear, O Israel". In Hebrew, the word is "**Shema**". It is a word that means emphatically, "to listen". Jesus repeats this passage from Deuteronomy when asked, what is the first of all the commandments? Although, the Ten commandment has been augmented into 613, Jesus summarizes the Law with two commandments, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, love God and love neighbor. The words love God with all your heart...soul ...strength; stress that love of God is all inclusive with all of our human faculties.

Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is the only response to God who loves us so much. We want to love God by praying every day, attending Mass every Sunday, reading the Scriptures and spiritual books, and receiving the sacraments. We will not be happy, if we do not love God. In fact, we discover that when we love God, we become much happier. The more time we spend with God the more we receive the life of God and that life uplifts us, heals us, renews us and invigorates us. In fact, we discover that the more we love God the happier we are. We discover that the more we love God, the more we get a foretaste and glimpse of heaven here on earth. When we live the command that we heard in our first reading from Deuteronomy 6:4-6, and repeated by Jesus (Mark 12:29-30), we are happier and already begin to live a little bit of heaven here on earth.

When we contemplate that God loves everyone as much as he loves us, we think of everyone in a new way. Everyone is special to God. The love we know God has for us is also the love God also has for the person beside us, in front of us, behind us, for our neighbor who goes to a different church, for the people we may not particularly like, and the people who may not particularly like us. We are all God's beloved. When we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, what happens? We become more like God. We are filled with the light of God. One person who was an example of the love of God and neighbor in the 21st century was Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Finally, dear friends, the love of God and neighbor is the most favorite Bible quotation most of us know it so well, yet we normally gloss over it. The Gospel challenges us on many levels, especially the inclusiveness of everyone as our neighbor. How many of us miss tragedy under our noses, and how many suffer because of the cruelty of others. The Gospel today wants us to respond as positively as we can to all human needs - emotionally; psychologically and spiritually. 'Let us love not in word or speech, but indeed and in truth.' Amen!