

31st Sunday of Year--Cycle B

(Deut 6:2-6; Heb 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34)

Some of the most beautiful and important passages from Scripture can be the most difficult to preach on, especially those already well-known. Take this morning's first reading, "You shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." These words, along with, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!" begin the "Shema," the prayer that observant Jews pray twice a day. Today's reading was chosen, of course, to go with today's gospel. The Rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Torah, so disputes over which are most important are conceivable. The person who asks Jesus about "the first of all the commandments" is sincere and Jesus gives him a serious answer about the first commandment, but also adds, from the Book of Numbers, "the second is this, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This suggests that love of neighbor is surpassed in importance only by love of God.

In Luke's gospel, a similar exchange leads to the question, "and who is my neighbor?"--to which Jesus responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan. So we know the question "who is my neighbor" could be a problem for some.

I remember once speaking to a man after a Mass at which today's gospel had been read, and he was very enthusiastic. "That's really great," he said; 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all

your mind, and with all your strength'--so beautiful and so easy!" I asked, "So you think that's easy?" "Oh, yes!" "What makes you think you love God that much?" He looked at me in surprise. "Why, I know what I feel, and that's the way it is. I just love Him." "But St. Paul tells us that 'it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.' Have you put your love to the test of love of neighbor?" "What does that mean?" "Well, if Jesus said, 'The second is like this,' it must be pretty important. Ten times St. John quotes Jesus as saying, 'As I have loved you, so also you should love one another.' At one point John asks, 'If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?'"

"For example, do you love women?" "Oh, yes, of course, as long as they know their place, that is." "Their place?" "They shouldn't aspire to be president, or head of a corporation. Their place is the home; they should be happy to be wives and mothers."

"Well, let's take the Spanish. Do you love the Spanish people?" "Oh yes, I love the Spanish people! They are great! They have flamenco and tango dances, the opera Carmen, they have tortillas, Salvador Dali the artist, Cervantes the author. If only" "If only what?" "I can't stand to hear them speaking Spanish in my presence." "Don't you think it is more melodic than English?" "That doesn't matter. If they are in America they should speak English. It drives me up the wall that they don't."

"Well, how about Mexicans. Do you love the

Mexicans?" "Oh, yes, the Mexicans are great. La cucaracha, and all that; tacos, carnitas, hot tamales, great food. I love mariachi music, pinatas. Just great, except ..."

"Except?" "Except when they try to come into this country. They should stay south of the border. We are told there are rapists and criminals among them. And this group from Honduras, we are told, have middle easterners among them intent on terrorism. Why don't they stay where they belong?" "Why?" I said, "Because they are fleeing poverty, sometimes actual starvation. Mothers with their sons are fleeing a drug culture that threatens whole families--death to the sons who won't join the gangs, families in danger from police who are corrupted, in the employ of the drug lords." "Well, let them go elsewhere. We don't have room for them here." "No room? I know from experience that you can drive for miles and miles through New Hampshire forests without seeing a sign of human habitation. Many other areas are similar, no doubt. The Mexicans, with one-seventh of our average income, have offered these Hondurans hospitality and place to live and work. Even Uganda, certainly not a rich country, has offered home to 1.25 million refugees, even sharing their own land with them, giving opportunity to earn a living, even medical care. Their government has made hosting refugees a core national policy, though they come 106th among nations for wealth. Our country, on the other hand, though at the top of that list, terms their coming an 'invasion' and calls out the troops at the approach of a

few thousand, the rhetoric dubbing it a 'national emergency,' stirring up fear and hatred. Last Sunday's NYT quotes a woman as claiming that this migration is 'a ploy to bring America to its knees.' She goes on, 'I won't take it--I'll go down fighting.' See how hatred is stirred up!

"The world belongs to God, not us; we are merely caretakers for Him. Our nation occupies a broad, beautiful, fertile land, most of this huge continent; don't you think God will hold us accountable if we refuse to share it with His children in their desperate need? Remember what Jesus said about doing or not doing to Him what we did or failed to do for one of His little ones."

"I think we will all be better off if they stay where they belong. After all, they are 'different.' Why should we have to rub elbows with them?" "'Different,' of course, but different doesn't mean bad. Do you know what 'xenophobia' means?" "No." "That's good because it doesn't belong in a Christian's vocabulary. Do you remember the Church's founding at Pentecost? We are told that the crowd that heard Peter, those who believed and were baptized, were Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt, Libya, Jews and converts, Cretans and Arabs. All these came together to make the one Catholic Church." "Well, that was written by St. Luke; I think it's tendentious; he was clearly a globalist, while I am a Nationalist."

"Well, that was the beginning of the Church and it has had a long, if at times checkered, history. But I beg you

to think eschatologically." "Eschatologically?" "Yes, eschatologically. The world, God's history with the world, with humankind, will come to an end. If something isn't done about our ecology, it may be sooner than we think. But in any case the Book of Revelation describes the final stage. It says the Devil and his angels, the Beast, the false prophet, those deceived by him, and all deceivers, will be cast into the burning pool of fire and sulphur (20:10; 21:8). In a different tableau we see 'a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cry out in a loud voice, "Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb."'

I think it is safe to call all these people "globalists," with no "nationalists" in sight. It is clear that these are the ones who "love the Lord their God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, with all their strength, and who love their neighbor as themselves."