

[Deuteronomy 6: 2-6, Mark 12:28-34]

A favourite game when we were children was to claim, rather selfishly, that we had the best toy, or marbles, or collection of weeties-cards or whatever else, among all the kids in our group. Comparing and ranking things in this way is an essential part of our learning; but it is hardly mature behaviour if we continue doing it when we are adults.

In today's gospel, when that scribe asked Jesus which is the *first* of all the commandments, was he trying to pick the best among the hundreds of Judaic laws? Was he trying to find the best way to serve God? Or was there a trace of egoism in his showing that he knew the laws and obeyed them more perfectly than most other people?



Tibetan Mandala: the cosmos

The many laws in the Hebrew bible were written to guide people in their daily lives. They covered diet, hygiene, property, marriage and many other things. By asking Jesus to pick the first among them, the Scribe was expecting him to *separate* one from the rest. But Jesus was careful to *gather* the many laws into just two, and to *link* those two together. Jesus was showing that all good laws *serve one purpose*, they help us *care for each other*, which is the same as *loving God*.

In order to learn anything, we often need to cut it apart, to analyse it, so as to understand it. We used to cut up frogs biology class; and students in technical college used to take apart engines. But we will know things properly only when we can again see them as a *whole*.

My early Catholic education certainly stressed moral laws and rules, but it wasn't always clearly pointed out that the reason for them all was to teach us to love. Later in my life it was a revolution to move from 'law' to 'love' as the basis of life. We do need to teach children basic rules of behaviour, how to live in the community, especially by respecting others. But even little ones can understand that we do things this way because other persons need our love.

We begin to understand other people only when we start to see them as our sisters and brothers; connected to us because we are all part of the same immensely long evolutionary creation; all *children of the one Creator*. With good reason, the ancient Jewish Law *begins* with: 'Listen Israel, the Lord our God is one...' This is still the basic prayer of Judaism.

In many ways our civilisation is making real progress towards unity. We can now see our whole planet from above. We can communicate world-wide in an instant. We have cracked the DNA codes that underlie all life, and we have taken steps towards world government through the UN, EU and globalised treaties. This progress itself brings enormous risks and challenges, and there is still much arms dealing, violence and war, but there is no denying our progress towards unity.

Jesus shows us by his life and death that our relationship with God is not that of a criminal to a police constable, or even a servant to a master, but rather that of a child to its mother. Even more deeply, the Scriptures and the mystics tell us that we can look at God as lovers gaze at each other. Being loved by God unites us, and we can draw on the love we receive abundantly from God, to care for other people when they need us. This vision can transform the way we see every person. It also shows us why it is such a terrible abuse to destroy the planet by our careless greed.

When we can see that God loves all people, we also see that the 'law' of loving our neighbour links us directly with every oppressed person crying for justice. Love impels us to be nonviolent, to abhor

war and the death penalty as much as we abhor abortion. Love impels us to shun any action that would take away the life or dignity of our weakest sisters or brothers.

Jesus often criticised the Jewish leaders for not treating people justly: lepers; social outcasts like tax agents; the disabled of all kinds. He broke the laws about the holy Sabbath, in order to help people. For loving in this way, he was eventually murdered.

The lawyer in today's gospel seems to get this, for he affirms that ***the two commandments together*** are 'far more important' than any other offering we can give to God. In fact the prayers and devotions that we 'give to God' are often, deep down, attempts to bribe God, hoping for a reward. This too is hardly mature adult behaviour.

The real meaning of sacrifice - 'making holy' – is loving God and other people. Today's other reading from *Hebrews* describes Jesus as a priest because he lived and died for others. Whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we bring our efforts to love God and our neighbour, and join these with Christ, who of course is still working through us. Our self-giving, joined to Christ's, is truly a sacrifice. The Sign of Peace with which we greet each other, eloquently expresses our combined efforts to bring about *the Reign of God* in our world.

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