

"On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also". So Jesus declares as the conflict between him and the Jewish authorities intensifies day by day. With good reason we could say that this twofold command – to love God with all our might and to love our neighbour as ourselves – is Jesus' last will and testament, soon to be embodied in bread and wine.

In the Sermon on the Mount placed much earlier in the gospel, Jesus had summed up the Law and the Prophets somewhat differently: "... always treat others as you would like them to treat you". This formula, known as the Golden Rule, is to be found in many religious traditions and their scriptures. Some would say it is a universal principle that offers humanity its best hope for the future.

Jesus does not invent these pithy sayings. They were already embedded in his own Jewish tradition as well as in others. The originality of Jesus lies in two things: the personal testimony of his own unconditional love of God and neighbour, and the revelation that in him the infinite love of God has taken flesh and dwelt among us. Love knows no bounds.

A reading from the book of Exodus

22:20–26

The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the sons of Israel this, "You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt. You must not be harsh with the widow, or with the orphan; if you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall hear their cry; my anger will flare and I shall kill you with the sword, your own wives will be widows, your own children orphans."

"If you lend money to any of my people, to any poor man among you, you must not play the usurer with him: you must not demand interest from him.

"If you take another's cloak as a pledge, you must give it back to him before sunset. It is all the covering he has; it is the cloak he wraps his body in; what else would he sleep in? If he cries to me, I will listen, for I am full of pity."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 17:2–4, 47, 51

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, Lord, my strength,
my rock, my fortress, my saviour.
My God is the rock where I take refuge;
my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.
The Lord is worthy of all praise:
when I call I am saved from my foes. R.

Long life to the Lord, my rock!
Praised be the God who saves me.
He has given great victories to his king
and shown his love for his anointed. R.

First Reading

In the book of Exodus the list of the Ten Commandments (or "words") given to Moses on Mount Sinai is followed by a lengthy unit called the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22 – 23:33). These three chapters are said to contain the oldest legislative material in the Old Testament.

They reminded Israel constantly of God's purpose in leading them to the Promised Land. The gift of the land carried a serious responsibility – to establish a society that reflected the justice of God. Just as God had exercised his justice on their behalf, by liberating them from oppression in Egypt, they were to show the same justice to strangers and the poor in their midst.

In ancient patriarchal societies the most vulnerable people were foreigners, widows and orphans. They had no one to protect them. God's justice was also to be extended to the poor whose most valuable possession was their cloak. So weighty was Israel's responsibility for justice that failure would have directly reverse consequences: "my anger will flare and I shall kill you with the sword, your own wives will be widows, your own children orphans".

Readers are challenged by this text to proclaim it with seriousness while allowing congregations to hear that at the heart of God's demands is a passion for justice for all.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 17/18 is a prayer of praise offered to God by a king who has been saved from his enemies. It is found also in 2 Samuel 22 where David gives thanks for having been delivered from the murderous hands of Saul.

The response is the same as the first line of the psalm: "I love you, Lord, my strength". The verses selected for the responsorial psalm could be prayed by anyone who has experienced God's help in a time of distress. It is only in the last two lines that mention is made of "his king" and "his anointed".

The spirit of the psalm is one of love and gratitude; readers should find themselves naturally adopting this tone. They need to take care with the first verse because of its extra length. This means ending the fourth line with an upward intonation to make it clear there is more to come. At the end of the sixth line a downward intonation and an upward glance should be sufficient cues for the response.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians 1:5–10

You observed the sort of life we lived when we were with you, which was for your instruction, and you were led to become imitators of us, and of the Lord; and it was with the joy of the Holy Spirit that you took to the gospel, in spite of the great opposition all round you. This has made you the great example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia since it was from you that the word of the Lord started to spread – and not only throughout Macedonia and Achaia, for the news of your faith in God has spread everywhere. We do not need to tell other people about it: other people tell us how we started the work among you, how you broke with idolatry when you were converted to God and became servants of the real, living God; and how you are now waiting for Jesus, his Son, whom he raised from the dead, to come from heaven to save us from the retribution which is coming.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 22:34–40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees they got together and, to disconcert him, one of them put a question, 'Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?' Jesus said, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also.'

Second Reading

Today's extract from 1 Thessalonians follows directly on from the greeting and introduction that we heard last week. The tone remains positive and affectionate. Paul is surely endearing himself to the Thessalonians by voicing such appreciation of the witness they were giving.

He is pleased that they "were led to become imitators of us, and of the Lord". It was "with the joy of the Holy Spirit" that they "took to the gospel". They had become "the great example to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia" and were "servants of the real, living God". The effectiveness of their testimony was no doubt assisted by Thessalonica's strategic position as a seaport on the Macedonian coast.

Paul's words and ideas flow freely as the reading progresses. The last third of the reading is a single complex sentence. Readers will need to examine this section particularly carefully. It will bear being proclaimed slowly enough for the congregation to hear each part of the sentence distinctly and grasp how it all holds together.

The very last clause – "to come from heaven to save us from the retribution which is coming" – provides an early clue to the theme of the second coming that follows later in the letter.

Gospel

The gospel text is short and well-known. The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees – "which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" – was not devious in itself. The issue was commonly debated among rabbis in those times. But Matthew attributes malign motives to the Pharisees in posing the question. This prepares his readers for the rejection and condemnation of Jesus that will soon follow. The negative portrayal of the Pharisees may also reflect later antipathy between Christian and Jewish communities.

Jesus' reply is not original. He quotes two texts that would have been familiar to his audience, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Nonetheless he makes his reply with the sureness of an authoritative teacher. Before long he will bear witness to the spoken word in the manner of his death.

The implicit hostility in the Pharisees' question does not need to be overplayed, but Jesus' reply, now so familiar, should be proclaimed with deliberation and great warmth.