

31th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

(Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28b-34)

by Father Charles Fillion

31 October 2021

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we hear today in the first reading and in Gospel the fundamental prayer of the *Shema*, the Hebrew profession of faith: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Just as we profess our faith with the Creed in Christian worship, the Jewish people profess their faith with the *Shema* in their synagogue services. The Shema is a summary of true religion: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Central to the Hebrew profession of faith is this truth: there is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who is thus the God of all. All other gods are not God, and the universe in which we live has its source in God and was created by him. This notion of creation is found elsewhere, yet only here does it become absolutely clear that it is not one god among many, but the one true God himself who is the source of all that exists. The entire whole world comes into existence by the power of his creative Word.

Today’s key question “Which is the first of all the commandments?” offers Jesus an important teaching moment. The teachers of the Torah (scribes and rabbis) had always argued about the relative importance of the commandments in the Old Testament. At the time of Jesus, besides the Ten Commandments, there were at least 613 other commandments. So much so that the religious authorities argued which were more important. Sincerely curious, and wondering “Which is the greatest of all our laws?”, the scribe, compare to other occasions, is not trying to trip Jesus up. Jesus hears the open heart and answers by going to the root of all Jewish Law. Jesus quotes the Shema, recited daily by the Jews.

Even though Jesus is asked for one commandment, he provides two in his response. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself, from Leviticus 19:18, which was also not among the 613 commandments. The scribe, already impressed how Jesus answers hard questions, expresses agreement with Jesus by paraphrasing him without any hint of hostility or irony. It’s like if a light bulb came on, and you realize that you knew the answer and you are glad that is what you believe in the first place.

In referring to heart, soul, and mind, and strength, they do not refer to the various components of the person but are a way of stressing that the whole person should love God with everything the person has and is. Moses teaches in the Shema and Jesus reaffirms in the Gospel, that all of the Commandments are summed up in the love of

God and loving-kindness towards one's neighbour. Every time that Jews recite the "Shema Israel" and that Christians recall the first and second great commandments, we are, by God's grace, brought closer to each other.

Whenever we make the sign of the cross, we are actually tracing the Shema upon our bodies as we touch our head (soul), heart, and shoulders (strength) and pledge them to God's service. When we cross our forehead, lips, and heart, before I read the Gospel, again we are actually tracing the Shema. In the outward sign of crossing our forehead, lips, and heart, we are asking that the Word of God to pierce our mind, lips, and hearts. We cross our forehead so that the Word of God may be in our thoughts and purify our minds. We cross our lips so that our speech may be holy and incline us to share the Gospel with others. And we cross our hearts to invite God to strengthen our love for Him and others. All of this is so that we might know, proclaim, and love of God all the more.