

Matthew 22: 34-40

34 After hearing that Jesus had muzzled the Sadducees, the Pharisees gathered where he was 35 and one of them, a lawyer, questioned him to test him: 36 "Teacher, what is the great commandment of the Law?" 37 Jesus answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being and in all your understanding. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 The whole book of the Law and the Prophets hangs on these two commandments".

Gospel commentary - Homily

What is it to love God?

Recently, I spent five days in hospital: internal bleeding due to stomach ulcers led me to urgent care, where I received two blood transfusions. I had to undergo an endoscopy which revealed bacteria in my stomach. As during this period I had to stop taking the anticoagulants required since my pulmonary embolism a few years ago, a machine had to compress my legs in pulses day and night to ensure blood circulation and prevent the formation of clots. What's more, during this hospital stay, I was diagnosed as a diabetic, which means I'll have to go on a very strict diet; all this on top of the bad news that X-rays taken a few months ago revealed severe osteoarthritis in both hips, requiring surgery. So imagine a man with IVs in both arms, and suction cups in his belly to check his heart: a veritable spectacle. So many blood samples were taken that new veins had to be found all the time. Despite the attentive care of an extraordinary team of nurses and the professionalism of the doctors, it's a painful time for any human being, and the nights are very long.

I intentionally offer you this context to enter into today's gospel. Matthew offers us a story that he copies from Mark, but shortens. We are in the final moments of Jesus' life, when opposition to him and his mission is growing. After the Sadducees' trick question about life after death, it's now the question that asks Jesus to specify which is the greatest commandment in the Law, the first volume of the Hebrew Bible. For Matthew, this is a trap, because you need to know that in the Jewish world there is a plethora of laws: according to the Talmud, an important Jewish writing, there are 613 commandments in the Torah; 248 positive commandments ("do") and 365 negative commandments ("don't"). This is a trap set for Jesus, because they want to check whether he is aware of these laws, just as one checks whether a Christian knows his Ten Commandments. The answer is unique and unprecedented, and, according to biblical scholars, goes back to the historical Jesus. This is because, for the first time, it brings together two passages from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 6:5 ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength") and Leviticus 19:18b ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself").

How are we to understand Jesus' response? Let's look at the meaning of the words, starting with "Thou shalt love". In the Old Testament, the verb "to love" is used not only in couple relationships, but also in family relationships, where preference is expressed for certain people. God loves by caring for human beings, in particular by saving them from enemies and distress, and human beings love God by following his laws, by accepting this world he gives them. And human beings love their neighbors by wishing them well.

What does it mean to love with all one's heart? In the Jewish world, the heart is the seat of inner dialogue, where sit memory, affectivity with its emotions, desires, interests and feelings, and therefore the source of values. It is in the heart that a person makes decisions, orients his or her life, and passes judgment on others and on oneself. To love God with all one's heart is to make God the center of one's feelings and decisions.

What does it mean to love God with all one's being? The Greek word used has two meanings: breath of life and being (often translated as "soul" by many Bibles). The term "being" refers to the incorruptible dimension of the person, as opposed to the body, which can die, and therefore designates the spiritual, individual, unique reality that distinguishes him or her from others. To love God with all my being is to love him with all my "I", with all my particularity.

What does it mean to love God with all my understanding? The Greek term used refers to the rational part of the human being, the seat of insights and understanding of the universe. This understanding of things is important, because it can be perverted. To love God with all one's understanding is to accept to be totally open to the truth of things as proposed by God.

What does all this mean for us today? God is an infinite mystery, one that largely eludes us. We cannot love God as we love someone we know well, whom we can touch and embrace, and help in difficult times. Making gestures of piety or being devout, attending the Eucharist, is not loving God, even if it can help and support us in loving God. We can't love God directly, but only through mediation, and this mediation is the universe, the created world, and more particularly what enters into my personal history. To love God is to say "yes" to life, and more particularly to the life that is mine. My life is made up of so many things: parents who did their best, but had significant limitations, a school career and educators who exerted a crucial influence, various forces that delayed the maturation of my being, missed opportunities, mistaken choices, moments of great joy as well as moments of psychological and physical suffering, a great love, a fulminating cancer or a degenerative disease. Everyone can make a list, everyone can name their traumas, everyone can name their oases of happiness. To love God is to recognize what constitutes our universe, our environment, our life, and to welcome and accept it. Of course, in what constitutes my life, there is "the neighbor", who can be anyone, from a spouse to an immigrant. That's why, when Matthew copies Mark's text on the commandment to love, he takes the liberty of adding the phrase: "the second is like the first", because in fact, he is an integral part of the first: the neighbor is part of the universe of my life.

So, I'm faced with a choice. After my hospital stay, I find myself with diminished health, severe limitations in my diet and a dependence on a battery of pills. Spontaneously, I could say "cursed life". But to love God with all one's heart, with all one's being and with all one's intelligence is to say: "blessed life", and to make love blossom strongly at the heart of this life.