

In today's gospel reading, the Lord gives us the perfect summation of what the spiritual life means:

“You shall 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 is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22: 34-40).

In the gospel of Mark (12: 28) Jesus prefaces these words with the first line of the *Shema Yisrael: Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*, which means. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God.” Here he is quoting one of the oldest and most venerable prayers in Judaism, which continues as we have it in today's gospel: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The Shema is one of only two prayers specifically commanded in the Torah – the other is grace after meals. It has been recited in the morning and at night since ancient times. By adding “The second resembles it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself” to such a venerable prayer, Jesus is saying that love of neighbour is of virtually equal importance as love of God. This would indubitably come as a shock to the lawyer who asked him what the greatest commandment was, since as a pious Jew he would have believed God in his transcendent majesty and power, always to be loved, worshipped and obeyed, was far above any love that was owed to neighbour. Only in

Leviticus – which enumerates many and various laws from not picking up grapes that have fallen from the vine, to not degrading one's daughter by making her a prostitute – do we have the injunction: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” but it is in the context of not bearing grudges or seeking vengeance.

By elevating love of neighbour in this way, Jesus is, in a very real sense, implying that his authority is greater even than that of the Law, which was by tradition ascribed to Moses. Indeed, in Matthew 12: 8 he explicitly says: “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Another really significant addition he makes to what is essentially the beginning of the *Shema Yisrael* is this: “Upon these two commandments hang the whole of the Law and the Prophets.” Here he is saying that all the Jewish religious practice, the 613 *mitzvot* or rules and commandments, all recitals of prayer, Temple worship – every iota of observance – can be fulfilled in love of God and neighbour or, if you like, can be ‘reduced’ to those two commandments. Yes, follow as many *mitzvot* as best you can, teach others to do the same, pray in the synagogue and the Temple, study the Torah, but let all these things be channels or vessels or conduits and expressions of your love for God *and* neighbour. Because without that, they mean nothing. The same thing could also be said to us in our day, I suppose: Yes, come to Mass, to Confession, say your prayers, recite the rosary, read the scriptures and the lives of the saints, but

let all these things be expressions of your love for God *and* neighbour. Because without that, they mean nothing.

This shouldn't really surprise us, I think, because most of the world's great religions – some more explicitly than others – have taught the radical inseparability of love of God and love of our fellow human beings, even though a goodly number of them often present themselves as distinctly unlovable. Yet Jesus asks us: “If you love only those who love you, of what credit is that?” (Matthew 5: 46). If our love does not include the unlovable, it is incomplete. It is also a sobering thought that some people might actually find *us* unlovable. Yet, the more we think about it, the more we can perhaps see that love of God is pretty much impossible without love of our brothers and sisters, because we can only love him – whom we cannot see or hear or touch or comprehend – *through* them, whom we *can* see, hear and touch. One expresses and reveals the other. Love cannot happen in a vacuum. How do we love God in spirit? In our prayer, in an authentically prayerful relationship with him and, for us, through the Mass and the Sacraments. All these things. How do we love him concretely, practically? Through our brothers and sisters. There is no other way.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the Lord tells us that whenever we do or neglect to do something to the least of his little ones, we do it or neglect to do it to him. Surely there can be no more powerful or unambiguous statement of the inseparability of these two kinds of love?

There is only actually one love, of course, but it has many expressions – the most important of which are God and neighbour.

St Catherine of Sienna said that love of God and neighbour are like two footprints in the sand: you always get the two together, one after the other.

And St Teresa of Avila said:

“Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

That is why all those old manuals of spiritual formation and the spiritual life that told us to put the love of no creature before the love of God, were wrong. The creature is not in competition with the Creator – rather, one is revealed in the other. Also, I suspect that the ‘love’ those manuals were obliquely referring to was not the kind of that love that Jesus meant. The perennial conjoining of God and neighbour rests upon – and manifests – a very profound truth: that we are not actually separate from our neighbour in our being, because all beings share in the fullness of the infinite Being of God. In him we are distinct, but not separate, we are individual but not apart. He is the sun and we are the rays: each ray strikes a different place, a different thing, at a

different time, with a different effect, but they cannot be divided because together they are one light; neither are they the sun, but have no existence without it. Some of the Hassidic rabbis have said that when the *Shema Yisrael* says: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God,” it actually means there is *only* God and he is All. In Isaiah 45: 6, the Lord speaks through the prophet to Cyrus, King of Persia (who will defeat Babylon and liberate the exiled Jews):

“Though you do not know me, I will strengthen you, so that from the rising of the sun to its setting, the peoples may know that besides me, all is nothing.”

It isn't easy, of course – it's often very hard for most of us, including me – but the only way to succeed is to try: to practice love of neighbour as a conscious ongoing spiritual exercise. That gentlest of men, St François de Sales – a bishop who never got to see his diocese (Geneva) because it was governed by the most ungentle misanthrope Calvin – wrote:

“You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working, and just so, you learn to love by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves.”

The love of neighbour that we practise is active: a good deed done, a smile of affirmation, a kind word, an unsolicited gift, a little time and attention, whatever we can manage and whenever we can manage it. These things may seem small enough, but love makes them great. Such acts are always

responsive, compassionate and healing. Here, I want to say that a wonderful example of this is the telephone 'network' set up by our own SVP in co-operation with Uttlesford: elderly or lonely or isolated people who are in need of reassurance and comfort in these times are called by volunteers at regular intervals simply to listen, talk and offer emotional and psychological support. This is the kind of love that is inseparable from the love of God.

Practising love of our brothers and sisters has a gradually transforming effect within us. It cannot be otherwise, for love always transforms. Our behaviour begins to change for the better: we become less inclined to judge others, to criticise, or harbour negative feelings about them. A certain deeply-rooted emotional stability begins to form in us: beneath the passing surface flux of everyday life, we can sense an abiding stillness that we may never have known before. We are much more ready to be honest with ourselves: we acknowledge and take responsibility for the less virtuous aspects of our character, the shadows in our heart that we keep carefully hidden are courageously exposed to the inner light. We are also more and more aware of our radical connection with everything that exists, from a blade of grass to a galaxy. The physicist Darryl Reaney wrote:

“From hydrogen, the simplest of atoms, have come symphony orchestras, diamonds, the glimmer of dew on spider-webs at dawn, the underwater flight of dolphins, the sheen of mother-of-pearl inside seashells, voyager

spacecraft, fractal images on computer screens, and the laser light of cognitive awareness. This is not a mechanical progression from simplicity to complexity; it is a creative act of unimaginable stupendous proportions. We – you and me – are the products of this evolutionary creative process. The universe is one in a way that we can hardly imagine. Our very bodies are made of exactly the same raw material as the most distant galaxies; they consist, if you like, of stardust.”

Heady stuff – yet this visionary realization sooner or later comes to us when we consciously practice loving others, because it is the vision that love itself sees and knows: all is one. And this, neatly, brings us back to the mystical meaning of the *Shema Yisrael*.