

Homily Sunday 31B: 4 Nov 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

If you follow the Sunday gospels, you noticed a quantum leap: we just leapfrogged over one and half chapters of Mark's gospel, from the blind man of Jericho to the friendly scribe in Jerusalem. It's important to note what has happened in between. Last Sunday the story of Bartimaeus was related. It was set at Jericho as Jesus was about to depart for Jerusalem. Since then, Jesus has arrived at his destination, entering with a big loud bang. He cleansed the Temple, driving out the moneychangers and merchants with a whip. He has gotten into a lot of bitter arguments with the religious authorities. Shortly after today's gospel, Jesus will deliver a series of dire predictions about the destruction of the Temple and the holy city, a speech which increases the tension between him and the powers that be. Throughout these passages, the stage is being set for the explosive finale where the authorities will arrest the Lord and have him crucified. Today's selection is a pacific interlude where an honest scribe asks a simple question about the first commandment. In response, Jesus gives him both the first commandment--to love the Lord w/ all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, and also the second commandment--to love one's neighbor as oneself. The gratuitous combination of the 2 suggests that they are inseparable; you can't really love God w/o really loving your neighbor and vice-versa. The scribe responds with approval and makes a significant comment: to fulfill these 2 commandments is greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. This mention of cultic ritual is made in the shadow of the Temple whose very purpose was to provide a sacred place to make offerings and sacrifices. The scribe sees that the fulfillment of these twin commandments--to love God w/ one's all, to love one's neighbor as oneself--is a greater work than the elaborate rituals being conducted at the nearby Temple. The Lord approves this insight and declares that the man is not far from the kingdom of God.

This passage helps us understand the complicated relationship between sacred worship and morality. For the commandment to love God and neighbor is the greatest, surpassing all liturgical prescriptions of the Old Covenant. This means that the Temple and the liturgies celebrated there are at the service of these commandments; the temple and its rituals exist as a forum where love for God and neighbor can be expressed and solidified. The Lord is about to replace the Temple, for he comes to fulfill the purpose for which it exists. More precisely, the Lord Jesus, by his sacrificial death, perfectly fulfills the commandment to love God with one's all, by offering the totality of his being on the altar of cross. His death at Calvary is the supreme expression of love for God and neighbor; it also the highest act of divine worship. Because Jesus loves God his Father with perfect love, he completely subjects his will to the Father's and lays down his life in absolute obedience. Moreover, Jesus offers this sacrifice out of love for his neighbor, his fellow men and women. The Lord loves them as himself, and this means he wants them to share completely in his joy. So by his death on the cross, he washes away the sins of the human race and enables human beings to become children of God, sharing in his perfect communion of love with his heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit.

All this has important implications for the practice of our Catholic faith. In his letter on the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict indicates that the renewal of our faith should bear fruit in increased charity towards God and neighbor. Put plainly, the Christian faith demands that we love: that we love God w/ all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Our moral life must square with our faith life; the religion we practice at Mass should govern the way we behave outside the Church walls. Our faith should inflame our love, and our love should express itself in intensified religious devotion as well as more fervent service of our brothers and sisters. We ought to come to Mass and perform other acts of religious observance out of love for God. And we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves out of love for this same God. May our sharing in this Holy Eucharist renew our faith, enkindle our love, and help us to draw ourselves and our neighbors closer to Christ.