

“Shema Yisrael!”

As you enter the house of any devout Jew, you will notice a small metal box fastened to one of the doorposts. If you observe your Jewish friend coming in or going out of his house, he will touch this little box as he passes. The box is called a *mezuzah* which literally means ‘doorpost’ and it contains a small scroll of parchment on which a qualified scribe has written the words of the *Shema*, considered the most important prayer of the Jewish religion, rather as the Our Father is for us. The Shema is also the most concise summary of the heart of Jewish faith. Its words form part of the first reading today from the Book of Deuteronomy: ‘*Listen, Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength*’.

Lawyers, like the one in the Gospel, were men trained in interpreting and applying the ten commandments and the many regulations that derived from them. They loved debating the finer points of the law and when anyone was asked by a lawyer, as Jesus was, “which is the first of all the commandments?” They would have been expected to answer with the Shema - that God is one and that we must love Him with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength. The lawyer was probably asking this of Jesus to test him and see if he was a faithful rabbi. Jesus gives the expected answer, but then he takes it further and adds on “you must love your neighbour as yourself”.

Once, when a famous Jewish teacher named Hillel was asked by one of his students to be taught the whole of the law whilst stood on one leg. Hillel replied “What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour” that sums up the whole of the law. So we have two summaries of the Law, one which speaks of loving God and the other that concerns respect and one’s neighbour. Jesus raises this to another level by saying that the whole of the law can be summed up in one commandment: Love. This is not surprising when we consider that God is Love. But this love has two inseparable components: love of God and love of neighbour.

Indeed, the whole of the commandments *can* be summed up in this way: the first three relate to love of God while the remaining seven concern how we show our love for other people.

These two aspects of love, while distinct, cannot be separated and cannot truly be said to exist apart. St John writes: ‘Anyone who says, "I love God," and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen.’ (1 John 4:20). There can be no perfect love for God when we hold a grudge, hate or are alienated from other people.

The lawyer is more than happy with Jesus’ answer and he goes on to say, rather interestingly, that loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself is ‘far more

important than any holocaust and sacrifice'. Now these are dangerous words. He is saying that loving our neighbour is more important than what priests do in the Temple. In the story of the Good Samaritan two priests refuse to help the injured man in the gutter because if they do so they risk becoming unclean and unable to offer worship. The lawyer is challenging centuries of tradition and saying helping people is much more important than religious rituals. And this is the meaning of Jesus' words too.

This has implications for us. It means, for instance, that no priest may put religious ritual before love of the people and respect for them. So I would understand this to mean, for instance, that a priest who refuses to let communicants receive the host in their hand is getting his priorities wrong. Similarly, a priest who imposes celebrating the Mass with his back to the people is putting 'sacrifice and holocaust' before love of neighbour. Or, at the other end of the scale, a priest who insists a person stands to receive communion when they wish to kneel as their way of showing respect for the Lord, is failing to understand the implications of the great commandment of love. People come before ritual. St Vincent de Paul wrote that it is right and appropriate to interrupt prayer time in order to serve the needs of the poor. 'If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time', he writes, 'do whatever has to be done with peace of mind...Love is certainly greater than any rule'.

The same applies to all of us. To refuse to offer the sign of peace at Mass, to insist another person moves from '*your*' seat, to judge a person unworthy to be there because they have an illegitimate child or an irregular marriage or an unruly toddler is to miss the point that the lawyer takes from Jesus in the Gospel that 'to love your neighbour as yourself...is far more important than any sacrifice or holocaust'. Or, as St Paul says elsewhere, 'If I have faith in all its fullness...but without love, then I am nothing at all', and again, 'Do not let your love be a pretence, but sincerely prefer good to evil. Love each other as much as brothers [and sisters] should, and have a profound respect for each other'. This is nowhere more important than here in the Mass for if holy communion means anything at all it means that the community we belong to here with one another and with Christ Jesus our Lord is as holy as it gets - or should be.