THIRTIETH SUNDAY (A) **25 October 2026**

The people in the Old Testament were faced with hundreds of laws. With so many laws, we can understand why they often debated about them and tried to work out which of them were important and which were not. The advantage of these debates was that it helped them to get to the true foundation of what God had commanded. The disadvantage was that people might never get to that foundation and could end up choosing whatever they felt were the important laws. In that situation, they often lost sight of what God had commanded and simply thought about what they really wanted for themselves.

We see one of those debates going on in the gospel today. Jesus doesn't waste any time in taking them to what is most important. He tells them that among all the commandments, there is only one which matters. It is the greatest. It is that they should love the Lord their God with their whole heart, their whole soul and their whole mind. The love that Jesus is talking about is more than a sentiment or a feeling. He is talking about a decision that shapes the way a person lives, the choices they make and the character they develop. I imagine that the lawyer who asked Jesus the question would have been happy with the answer Jesus gave. It would be hard to say that there is anything more important than loving God. And just as important was the face that in giving his answer, Jesus quoted from the great Jewish command that God gave through Moses.

Jesus then makes a move that may have startled his listeners. He said that loving your neighbour resembles this first command to love God. I think it would have startled the listeners because it could have suggested that all people were on the same level as God. But that would be to misinterpret what Jesus was saying. If we want to make sense of Jesus' linking love of God and love of neighbour, then I think we have a way to understand it in the first reading. There we have Moses giving the people some simple commands about loving their neighbour.

These commands are characterised by their concern for the weakest and the most vulnerable – the stranger, the widow and the orphan. These were the people that the most powerful in the society usually took advantage of – the ones who had no one to advocate for them. Moses' words were strong: don't molest them, don't oppress them, don't be harsh with them. And then he gives a different example. If they take someone's coat as a sort of pledge, then they should give it back at nighttime otherwise the poor person will have nothing to wrap himself in to keep warm during the night. The thing that strikes me about all these commands is that there is

something very human about them. They are not harsh; they are not hard to do. In fact, they bring out the best in people. Keeping these commands is what makes a society a genuinely human society. Through Jesus, these same attitudes have come into Christianity and have been valued as the signs of a healthy society.

There is something else going on in what Moses said to the people, and it is important. He gave them the reason why they should act like this. They had to remember that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt. In other words, he asked them to remember what God had done for them. In a certain sense, they were no different to the strangers, the widows and orphans that they were seeing. Moses was asking them to hear the cry of the poor, just as God had heard their cry in Egypt. Not only did God hear their cry, but God also acted to free them from captivity. God loved them. Moses is telling them that when they hear the cry of the poor, they also need to act. Rather than being harsh with the poor and the strangers, and taking advantage of their vulnerability, they should show them compassion and assist them. Moses is telling them to act like God acted for them – to love like God.

This helps us understand what Jesus was saying when he said that the command to love your neighbour resembles the command to love God. To love your neighbour is to treat them the way that God would. In the early church, St John went so far as to say that if we say we love God and do not love our neighbour, then we are liars. Throughout history, the Christian community has had a special place for the weakest and the most vulnerable. Churches were places of refuge and sanctuary for those who were being persecuted or taken advantage of. This attitude goes all the way back to Moses reminding the people of his time that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt. This same attitude is also contained in what we do at the beginning of each Mass when we acknowledge that we are sinners in need of God's mercy. Recognising our own need of God's mercy, we engage with others in that same spirit of mercy, so that we might be conveyors of the mercy of God to all those we meet. This is loving God and loving our neighbour.