

30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Matthew 22:34-40

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were two groups of Jewish religious leaders, opposed to each other in almost everything. The only thing they did seem to agree upon was that both groups hated Our Lord. In the events leading up to this Gospel, Our Lord had bested the Sadducees in an argument and so the Pharisees stepped in to take Him on themselves.

In Jewish law there were 613 commandments, no one of them less important than any other, and each of these 613 commandments had to be obeyed. The difficulty was that what might be called “heavy” laws such as not killing were to be taken as seriously as “light” laws such as the finding of a bird’s nest; one could take the eggs or the chicks but not the mother bird. Moreover, the reward for keeping both of these laws was the same. For the Jewish people, the Law were the commandments of God, given by God to Moses for the regulation of all the Jewish people. It was the keeping of the Law that marked one out as a Jew and unified the Jewish people; much like the Sacrament of the Eucharist marks one out as a Catholic and unifies the Catholic people. We would no more consider dishonouring the Blessed Sacrament than a Jew would consider disobeying any one of the 613 laws.

These laws however had become burdensome and their purpose or the reason for them had become lost over time. These laws were not intended to control people. They were laws that the Jewish people had formed to direct their worship of God. These laws, some of which concerned how to pray, others how to eat, others how to dress, were not distinguished as we would today between religion and ethics—they formed a whole, because their faith couldn’t be divided between what one did publicly and what one did privately, or what one did on the Sabbath and what one day on every other day of the week.

So when Our Lord was questioned by the Pharisees as to which of the 613 laws was the greatest, they were, in fact, trying to trap him, because if He listed any of the laws over any other He would be breaking the whole of the Law. Instead, Our Lord looks to the purpose of the Law. It is not obeying the Law for the sake of itself, but living one's life completely focused or oriented towards God. Our Lord says, "You shall love the Lord your God with your *whole* heart and with your *whole* soul and with your *whole* mind... [and] you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Everything that we are must be given in love to God, and to do this completely, we must love every man and woman—because in each man and woman lies the divine spark; each man and woman is created in the image and likeness of God. This is why St. John wrote: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Our Lord adds: "On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets." The word in Greek for "hang" is the same word used to describe a large object supported between two ropes. Here these two ropes are the two parts of the one commandment: love God and love neighbour, together which hold all that God has revealed. That's because all that God has revealed is to draw us to Himself—and not as individuals but as a people. That is why Our Lord said earlier: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Think of this: we know that it is against the law to drink a certain amount of alcohol and drive. Is this law obeyed for fear of getting caught by the police or is it obeyed because its purpose is to protect lives? To obey a law for fear of getting caught means that the law has become a burden and is seen as nothing more than a way to control our life. To obey a law for the sake of the reason for the law means that the law has become a guide to how to live in peace.

The commands of Christ and His spouse, Holy Mother Church, bind us together, not in chains, but in respect, and duty, and love. Love of God and love of neighbour means that we are to lift each other up, one on top of the other—reaching down to those below and holding our hands up to those above, so that together we reach God.