

THE EMMAUS SERIES

30th Sunday Year A

Exodus 22: 20-26

1 Thessalonians 1: 5-10

Matthew 22: 34-40

Which is the greatest commandment?

Today's gospel takes us to the ideal at the heart the teaching of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, as he contrasted the accepted standards of old Israel with his New Law, Jesus warned his followers that their 'uprightness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees'. It is not surprising, therefore, that the interpretation of the 'commandments of the Law' was one of the issues at stake in the conflict between Jesus and his enemies.

'Love your enemies', these words were addressed to a people whose traditions urged them to care for their own; but saw no place for good will and generosity to foreigners in general - whom they looked upon as rivals and enemies. Old Israel had been taken into covenant with the living God, shown in the Exodus to be the champion of the poor and oppressed. Through the covenant they were called to identify with the ways of God. In fact, their traditions – as today's reading from the book of Exodus makes clear – were remarkable compared with the outlook of other peoples of their time. As they began to learn what identification with God's ways involved; they recognised that they must care for the powerless - the poor, widows and orphans, the strangers who had settled among them. But they still had much to learn - their good will was not extended to all of God's children without exception. In advocating this as the ideal as his New Law of love, Jesus was not abolishing the old Law, but bringing it to 'fulfilment'. The ideal held up by Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law was clear: 'I say this to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you will be children of your Father in heaven' (Mt 5:44).

Promoting a movement of popular renewal, the Pharisees sought to formulate summary expressions of the requirements of the Law. Their discussion along these lines is echoed in the antagonistic question with which they tried to confound Jesus. In his reply, Jesus refers to two commandments – implying that, in a certain sense, they constitute a single commandment. He refers to two well known texts: 'You must love the Lord with all your heart, soul and strength' (Deut 6:5) - a text familiar to devout Jews, as expressing the obligations of the covenant; and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18) – a text that declares, quite explicitly, that the neighbour referred to is a 'member of your race'. His uniting of these texts, in such a way that neither can have its full meaning without the other, takes us to the heart of the 'fulfilment of the Law' announced by Jesus. He has made it clear that his followers must identify with the boundlessly generous and inclusive ways of his Father; now he makes it clear that the outlook of the 'golden rule' - expressed in the second text he has quoted, and found in other ancient writings - must be the expression of a good will that has no limits. The identification with God's ways, called for in the covenant, has now found its full and final expression, as it did in the Good Samaritan parable – probably his best known – in response to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Against the background we have described, we recognise the revolutionary nature of Jesus' New Law of love. In fact, the universal good will taught by Jesus became the ideal of New Testament communities: 'When you did it to the least, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40); 'There can be neither Jew nor Greek, you are all one in Christ' (Gal 3:28). Paul recognised that this identification with God's ways is a gift of the Spirit – 'The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (Rom 5:5).

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