

If we all truly loved our neighbour as ourselves, wars would cease, corruption would disappear, universal fraternity would be no utopia and the civilization of love would soon become a reality.

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mk 12:31)

Here is one of those words of the Gospel that demand to be put into action immediately, this very instant. It is so utterly clear, and demanding, that it does not need a huge amount of comment. To see the power it contains, it may be useful, all the same, to look at it in its context.

Jesus is replying to the question of one of the scribes (one of the students of the Bible) who had asked him which was the greatest commandment.

One of the great teachers who had lived a few years before, Rabbi Shammai, had refused to say what he thought was the chief commandment. Others instead, as Jesus also did, focused on the central place of love. Rabbi Hillel, for example, affirmed: 'Do not do to your neighbour anything that is hateful to yourself: this is the whole of the Law. The rest is commentary.'¹

Jesus is not the only one to take up the teaching about the central place of love, but he put together, as a single commandment, the love of God (see Dt 6:4) and the love of neighbour (see Lev 19:18). The reply he gives to the scribe who is questioning him is in fact: 'The first [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'

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The second part of the single commandment is the expression of the first, love for God. Every one of God's creatures is so close to his heart that to give him glory, to show him in action the love we have for him, there is no other way than to be the expression of his love for all. As parents are happy when they see their children getting on with each other, helping each other, staying united, so also God – who for us is like a father and a mother – is happy when he sees we love our neighbour as ourselves, and so contribute to bringing about the unity of the human family.

For centuries Prophets had already been explaining to the People of Israel that God wants love and not sacrifices and holocausts (see Hosea 6:6). Jesus himself recalled their teaching when he said: 'Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners' (Mt 9:13). How indeed can we love God who we cannot see, if we don't love our brother or sister (see 1 Jn 4:20)? We love them, we serve them, we honour them to the measure that we love, serve, honour every person, both the friend and the unknown, from our own or from another people, above all the 'small', those most in need.

This is the invitation to the Christian in today's world: to translate worship into life, to go forth from the churches, where we adore, love, praise God, so that we go to meet others, in such a way as to practise what we have just learnt in prayer and communion with God.

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¹*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath Folio 31a.*

How then can we live this command of the Lord's?

Let's remind ourselves that it is part of an inseparable pair that includes love for God. We have to give ourselves time to get to know what love is and how we can love, and so we need to give space to moments of prayer, of 'contemplation', of dialogue with him. We learn love from God, who is Love. We don't steal any time from our neighbour when we stay with God, indeed we prepare ourselves to love in a way that is increasingly generous and appropriate. At the same time, when we come back to God having loved other people, our prayer is more genuine, more true, and is filled with all the persons we have met, who we bring back to him.

To love our neighbours as ourselves we need, then, to get to know them as they know themselves. We ought to reach the point of loving as the other wants to be loved and not as we would like to love. Now that our societies are becoming always more multicultural, with the presence of people from a huge variety of backgrounds, the challenge is even greater. Someone who goes to a new country has to learn its traditions and values; only in this way can they understand and love the people who live there. The same thing is true for those who receive new immigrants, who are often bewildered, struggling with a new language, and finding it difficult to fit in.

Differences are present within the same family, in the workplace or in the locality, even when they are made up of persons who belong to the same culture. Would we like to find someone who's ready to set aside time to listen to us, to help us revise for an exam, to find a job, to tidy our house? Perhaps the other person has similar needs. We have to know how to intuit them, being attentive to the other, adopting a sincere attitude of listening, putting ourselves in the other's shoes.

The quality of our love also matters. The apostle Paul, in his celebrated hymn to charity, lists some of its characteristics, which it could be useful to remember: it is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful or arrogant, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable, keeps no score of wrongs, but bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (see 1 Cor 13:4-7).

How many chances and how many nuances there are to living:

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'!

In conclusion we can recall that this principal for human existence is at the basis of the well-known 'golden rule' that we find in all religions and in all the great teachers of 'secular' culture. We could try to find, at the origins of our own cultural tradition or religious belief, similar invitations to love our neighbour and then help one another to live them together: Hindus and Muslims, Buddhists and followers of traditional religions, Christians and men and women of good will.

We have to work together to create a new mentality that gives value to the other, that instils and encourages respect for the person, that cares and protects minorities, that is attentive to the weakest, that sets aside one's own interests to put those of the other into the first place.

If we were all truly aware of having to love our neighbour as ourselves, to the point of not doing to the other what we do not wish to be done to us and that we should do to the other what we wish the other would do for us, wars would cease, corruption would disappear, universal fraternity would be no utopia and the civilization of love would soon become a reality.

Fabio Ciardi