

Commentary to the 31 Sunday in Ordinary Time



Gospel Summary

Mark 12:28-34

In a friendly conversation a scribe asks Jesus what he believes the first of all the commandments to be. Jesus replies by quoting from a prayer that the scribe, he himself, and every faithful Jew would recite every day from memory: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Dt 6:4-5). To this commandment Jesus then immediately joins a commandment from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When the scribe expresses agreement with understanding, Jesus says to him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Mark adds that no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions.

Life Implications

After reading dozens of pages in the various biblical dictionaries, one wishes that someone had dared to ask Jesus what he meant when he said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The expression "kingdom of God" appears more than 150 times in the New Testament. It not only points to the mystery of Jesus, God incarnate, but also to the mystery of human communion in divine life now and at the end-time. A recent declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith ("Dominus Iesus") states that the meaning of the kingdom of God both in Sacred Scripture and in documents of the Catholic tradition is not always exactly the same.

With the disclaimer that the divine-human reality cannot fully be contained by human concepts, the kingdom of God seems to include three principal aspects: (1) God's plan and saving presence in history, not as a tyrant, but to invite all of us to loving communion in divine life; (2) the human acceptance of the divine gift through conversion in childlike faith and gratitude; and (3) the realm of life with God in and through the Church, fully to be realized only at the end-time.

Except for spatial proximity, the life implication of Jesus' saying "You are not far from the kingdom of God" is the same for us as it was for the scribe. Jesus himself is the saving presence of God inviting all of us to loving communion in divine life. Is it possible for us to respond by loving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves? It is possible only if we remember through the gift of faith that God in every moment of our life loves us with a total, personal love.

To the command that we must respond to God's love with total love, Jesus adds the command that we must love our neighbors as ourselves. The conjunction of the two commandments is already present in the Exodus tradition into which Jesus grew up. As a response to the love that was given to them through their liberation from slavery, the Israelites must never forget God's word to them: "...have the same love for him [the alien] as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34). A graphic statement in the First Letter of John forcefully reminds us that we must never forget the meaning of Jesus' words to the scribe of today's gospel and to us: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar..." (4:20).

The Spirit enabled Jesus perfectly to realize the kingdom of God in himself by accepting the Father's infinite love, by responding to that love in total trust and obedience, and by loving his neighbors even to giving up his life. When we pray "thy kingdom come" in our Eucharist today, we ask that the Spirit will bring about the realization of God's plan and loving presence in us and in each of our neighbors.

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