

Homily for 31 (B)

‘There is no commandment greater than these.’

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favourite dialogues in all movies comes from ‘A Fish called Wanda’. The Otto character, tough guy, played by Kevin Kline, is being berated by Wanda, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, for yet another unthinking act of unthinking aggression, in this case towards John Cleese. She calls him ‘stupid’, not for the first time. This is a sore point for Otto, who *is* a little cerebrally challenged, but likes to think of himself as an intellectual. He says:

Otto: Don't call me stupid.

Wanda: Oh, right! To call you stupid would be an insult to stupid people! I've known sheep that could outwit you. I've worn dresses with higher IQs. But you think you're an intellectual, don't you, ape?

Otto: Apes don't read philosophy.

Wanda: Yes they do, Otto. They just don't understand it. Now let me correct you on a couple of things, OK? Aristotle was not Belgian. The central message of Buddhism is not "Every man for himself." And the London Underground is not a political movement. Those are all mistakes, Otto. I looked them up.

Wonderful stuff! And I suspect that the central tenet of Buddhism is indeed not “Every man for himself”. Does Buddhism have a central tenet? I don't know, actually, but Christianity does, and Jesus tells us what it is today. When asked which is the first of all the commandments, he says

“This is the first: Listen, Israel, the lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

We see in this remarkable summation a response to the rabbinical debates of the time. There was liberal/conservative polarity in rabbinical thought at the time of Jesus particularly expressed in the friendly rivalry of rabbi Hillel, now known as Hillel the elder, and Rabbi Shammai. Hillel taught that the law could be expressed simply, in a nutshell, whereas Shammai taught that the 631 commandments of the Torah were irreducible and needed to be taken as a whole. There is a legend that a potential proselyte went to the two rabbis seeking a quick and easy way to become Jewish, and he demanded them, in turn, to explain the law while he stood upon one leg – quickly, in other words.

Shammai sent him away impatiently, telling him that to assimilate the law was a matter of long study, not a trivial matter. Hillel, on the other hand, gladly responded to the challenge. While the proselyte stood on one leg, he said

“What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Law; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.”

So, you see, the teaching concerning right action concerning one's neighbour was not new. What was new was the deepening of that teaching: concern, right action becomes *love*, brotherly love. And that's less than half of what is remarkable about this saying, for Jesus links, in spectacular fashion, love of neighbour with love of God himself. Hillel has said that you cannot be a good Jew without treating your neighbour with the care that you have for yourself. Jesus is saying that you cannot be a good Jew without assigning the same importance to loving your neighbour as to loving God. He does not explicitly say that love of God and love of neighbour are part of the same thing, but, in bringing the two sayings together from different Old Testament sources, he strongly implies a connection between the two. This must have seemed astonishing. The first commandment that he quotes is the famous Shema, from Deuteronomy 6, a text so sacred that pious Jews used to, and still do, wear little containers called phylacteries containing it on the forehead and the left forearm, and have other little containers, called mezuzas containing it attached to the doorpost of their house. Jesus takes this text, which any Jew would describe as the first commandment, and insists on associating it with real love of neighbour. Clearly, he was speaking within the tradition established by Hillel, and, equally clearly, he was revealing a profound link between love of God and love of neighbour which, from that moment, became the nutshell of our religious tradition, Christianity.

“Do not claim to love God, if you do not love your neighbour”, he might just as well have said. Better still, he might have challenged us to love God in our neighbour. He, the Son of God, is here showing us one of the most remarkable effects of the Incarnation. The Word was made flesh. God and man one and the love due to God, that same love, veneration, adoration needs to be reflected in our relations with our neighbours. I'll leave you to think about that and just finish with an anecdote. Once, I was chatting to the late Fr Malcolm Gray. Now, I am pretty much an old-fashioned Catholic and Fr Malcolm preferred modern churchmanship. I prefer to say mass facing East, with my back to the congregation, while Fr Malcolm much preferred to say mass facing West, facing the congregation. We teased each other a lot about this. One day I said, “I like to face the altar so that we are all turned together towards God.” He said, “I like to say mass turned towards God – in the people.” Good point, Father, good point.