

The Greatest Commandment

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

32 “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

שְׁמָע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד: schəma jisrael adonai elohenu adonai echad! This is the prayer a pious Jew prays on a daily basis, once in the morning, and once in the evening. And it continues (in Dtn 6:5): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” As a rabbi, Jesus was well acquainted with it, and may well have spoken it like all the others in Israel. But answering to the question asked by one of the teachers of the Law, He immediately adds quoting from Lev 19:18: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

We are witnessing to a discourse of experts in biblical theology. And we find that Jesus and this teacher of the Law are pretty much on the same page in their understanding of what is most important among God’s commandments. Both of them we see evaluating each other: Jesus, in the perception of the scribe, had given “a good answer” in the debate he had overheard. On the other hand Jesus comes to the conclusion that this man “had answered wisely”. That is to say, if we looked at the disputation Jesus was involved in according to standards of competition, this shows that Jesus Who, along the lines of Jewish understanding, was not a regular rabbi, proves to be at eye level with the “proper” teachers of the Law.

But this is, important as it is, just the surface. On a deeper level, we discover that Jesus’ way of combining the love of God with the love of the neighbour represents a singularity in the history of religions. The love of God forms the foundation, the background, and the basis for the love of the neighbour. The love of the neighbour, on the other hand, is the appropriate expression of the love of God, its implementation and realization: One cannot be without the

other. This interpretation excels all kinds of religious approaches to define the relationship between belief and morality. Why so? Because the divine giver of the Law provides us with His authentic interpretation of this relationship! In Christ, it is God Himself to deliver the genuine construction and understanding of His will. It is God's all-excelling singularity that Christ commemorates, including the obligation that follows and flows from precisely this uniqueness of the One and Only True God.

Thus, this greatest of all commandments comprises our human existence in all its relations. And Christ shows that to be truly human means to be in a healthy relationship with God and to live this out towards our neighbours in a God-given world. Moreover, He explains it takes the whole of our being to answer this commandment in an appropriate manner: Heart, soul, mind and all our strength have to be involved in the relationship with God. Not a trace of our existence can be set aside, or excluded. The demand in this commandment is a holistic one. Not a single trait of our sentiments is to be neglected. And that is our problem.

In his exposition to the Conclusion of the Ten Commandments, Martin Luther has put it this way:

“Just this is also the meaning and true interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all the others must flow and proceed, so that this word: *You shall have no other gods before Me*, in its simplest meaning states nothing else than this demand: You shall fear, love, and trust in Me as your only true God. For where there is a heart thus disposed towards God, the same has fulfilled this and all the other commandments. On the other hand, whoever fears and loves anything else in heaven and upon earth will keep neither this nor any.”

Celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in this year 2017, we find that Martin Luther was not only the great Wittenberg reformer, but that he became the reformer on the grounds of his bible-based theological insights. It is easy, I would say, to identify how Luther establishes his famous dual thesis in his Treatise on Christian Liberty of 1520 by articulating the biblical truth, expressing what we learn from Christ, in his own words and addressing it to his contemporaries:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. – A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (LW 31,).

The first thesis refers to faith, as you may well know, and the second one to Christian love. And faith, according to the Scriptures, and thus, in Luther's understanding is nothing but the God-given receptivity for His mercy and grace, focused on the forgiveness of sins. Faith does nothing but receive what Christ has accomplished, won, and achieved on Calvary. This can only happen – playing with words a little bit – in a “passive action”. That is to say, experiencing God's benevolence and favour, is by no means an act that we perform by ourselves, or our religious aptitude and pious abilities could ever bring about. Therefore, Luther says:

“I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine law, and I embrace only the passive righteousness which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.”

There the Wittenberg reformer makes it quite clear that according to his biographical experience, he was never in the position to fulfill the First commandment in a way that would meet Christ's expectations, or would have been God-pleasing in any way at all. It took Luther hard times of desperation, busy years of studying the Bible to overcome this attitude. Finally, he comes to see himself totally dependent on the love, attention, and care, that God Himself is willing to bestow upon him, and this insight makes him perceive God in a completely different way compared to the picture that he had learned from medieval theology:

“Therefore remember that the righteousness of God is that by which we are justified, or the gift of the forgiveness of sins. This righteousness in God is wonderful because it makes of God not a righteous Judge but a forgiving Father, who wants to use his righteousness not to judge but to justify and absolve sinner.”

And that is just the reason why we are here gathered on this morning for confession and absolution. Confronted with the reality of the Greatest Commandment, we realize how poorly we fail to correlate with God's holy will as it is laid down in Christ's exposition. At the same time, we come to realize that the One to authentically explain this commandment is the One and only to have fulfilled it in our stead. He, i.e. He alone has shown with all His heart, all His soul, all His mind, and all His strength that he loved His heavenly Father. He, Jesus Christ, and He alone has exhibited the love to His human brothers and sisters by taking our place when God's wrath was executed against our sinfulness and us sinners. In perfect obedience toward the heavenly Father, and in perfect solidarity with us, He went to the Cross to atone for us and our trespasses and to reconcile God with us.

Now Christ is using His righteousness exactly to absolve us on this Wednesday morning. Knowing that we, indeed, do not conform to God's will as we should, we are now confessing our shortcomings and asking for God's forgiveness. And it is Christ Who, as the authentic interpreter of God's commandments, and, at the same time the only One to perfectly keep them, speaks to us His forgiveness: Listen to His voice: “I forgive you all your sins.” Amen.