

Meditations: Thursday of the Ninth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the ninth week of Ordinary Time.

- The scribe's question
- Work as an offering to God and service to souls
- We never walk alone

THERE IS a scribe present when the Sadducees ask Jesus about the

resurrection of the dead. He sees how well Jesus answers and comes up to ask Him, *"Which is the first of all the commandments?"* Jesus replied, *"The first is this: 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. The second is this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these"* (Mk 12:29-31).

At first, Jesus' response does not seem to reveal anything new. He quotes the Shema, which all his Jewish listeners know and repeat several times a day. We are meant to love God completely, with all our affection, strength of will, and intelligence. However, sin makes it difficult to love God in this way, and we find it tiring to discern what is right in every situation. Reflecting on our freedom of choice, St. Josemaria

pointed out that "freedom finds its true meaning when it is put to the service of the truth which redeems, when it is spent in seeking God's infinite Love which liberates us from all forms of slavery. Each passing day increases my yearning to proclaim to the four winds this inexhaustible treasure that belongs to Christianity: 'the glorious freedom of the children of God!' This is essentially what is meant by a 'good will', which teaches us to pursue 'good, after having distinguished it from evil.'"^[1]

For his listeners, the striking thing about Jesus' answer is that He unites love of God and love of neighbour. He goes as far as to say that *on these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also* (Mt 22:40). Christ sets an example in his care for the sick and needy, the way He provided physical and spiritual nourishment for the people who followed Him, and the way He

responded to requests for help. On his last night with his disciples, He washed their feet – a service normally provided by slaves – to show them how to give themselves to others. Jesus clearly shows us "the order of charity: God, others, myself."^[2] In our prayer, we can consider whether Jesus' attitude is the one we take to our hopes, plans, and priorities for the day.

WE DO not know very much about Jesus' life before He started preaching publicly. The Gospel of Mark tells us that He worked as a craftsman (cf. Mk 6:3), which leads us to suppose that He would have carried out different projects for the inhabitants of Nazareth. He would have worked diligently to provide the best possible service. This way of working, which He probably learned

from Joseph, is fundamental for all Christians: we should work with a spirit of service and the desire to do good and care for others. The founder of Opus Dei said that "Joseph's work was not self-centred, even though his active life made him a strong and forceful personality. When he worked, he was aware that he was carrying out God's will; he was thinking of his people, of Jesus and Mary, and of everyone in Nazareth."^[3]

As a child, Jesus saw how Joseph transformed his work into an act of love for God and service to mankind. The holy patriarch's life took this shape because he supported his family through his daily occupation of manual labour. The scribe's reaction to Jesus' response underlines the meaning of all of Jesus' work, from his hidden efforts to his preaching: *Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, He is One and*

there is no other than he. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mk 12:32-33).

The scribe recognises that love of neighbour is the best thing we can offer God, and that it is an offering that we can give continually, in everything we do. Caring for our relationships with others is more valuable than any sacrifice we could make, because in doing so we unite ourselves to the charity that unites Jesus to his Father, which is the source of his service to all souls. Our tasks become worthy and pleasing offerings to God when they express that divine solicitude for our neighbours and those we serve through our work. As St. Josemaría said, "Our love has to be a dedicated love, practised every day and made up of a thousand little details of

understanding, hidden sacrifice and unnoticed self-giving. This is the 'aroma of Christ' that made those who lived among our first brothers in the faith exclaim: See how they love one another!"^[4]

JESUS NORMALLY manifested Himself in communities of people. When He retreated to pray in solitude, He often interceded for his people and prayed for the coming of the Kingdom (cf. *Lk 11:1-4*). Love for God does not isolate us from others: it turns us toward those around us. *He who does not love his brother who he sees*, writes St. John, *cannot love God who he does not see. And we have received this commandment from him: whoever loves God, let him also love his brother* (1 *Jn 4:20-21*). We may find it easy to love some people and difficult to love others because of

differences in character, experience, interests, or ways of acting. Each person is unique. But Jesus taught us how to strengthen a community of people. "As long as there is a brother or sister to whom we close our hearts, we will still be far from being disciples as Jesus asks us. But his divine mercy does not allow us to be discouraged, but rather calls us to begin anew each day to live the Gospel consistently."^[5]

We can try first with the people closest to us: relatives, friends, and colleagues. The desire to become more Christlike will lead us to set aside our own selfishness or comfort and take care of others' needs. It will also help us discover what the Lord and the people who love us do for us: "Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for

me and how much he loves me."^[6]
We can ask the Virgin Mary to help us to have a heart like hers, to love Jesus and all our brothers and sisters.

^[1] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 27.

^[2] St. Josemaria, *Alone with God*, no. 155.

^[3] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 51.

^[4] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 36.

^[5] Pope Francis, Angelus, 25.X.2020.

^[6] Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical *Deus caritas est*, no. 18.

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