

NOVEMBER 3 2024 MSGR. SAM BIANCO

"Love the Lord your God."

Although there's lots of evidence to the contrary, it seems, in terms of the wave of human history, we've never been more aware as a world of the necessity to love our neighbour, and who our neighbour is. All sorts of people, all sorts of institutions, are doing the very best they can to love people of any background, of any form of anything. All governments are challenged to do that. To paraphrase some words of Martin Luther King, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." And I would add to that, it not only bends towards justice, it's bending towards love, widening the sense of who our neighbour is and our obligations to that person.

It may, in some cases, just be virtue-signalling on the part of people, and there certainly is enough death and hate to overwhelm us. But generally speaking, I would say all individuals and all institutions, including the Church, are aware that we need to expand who our sense of neighbour is. The Good Samaritan. The person who's injured. And wherever there are signs of discrimination, of hate, of not loving people, we don't applaud that. We hope to work together, to love each day better and better who our neighbour is and to help that person. Well, that's the first part of the commandment.

The second part is a little more challenging. It may not be true in all parts of the world, especially since the pope has just come back from the Far East, where you see such a powerful outpouring of not only love of neighbour but love of God. But certainly, in what I would call the Western secularized world, the world of Canada, the United States, and Europe, the sense of love of God as being important or mattering has diminished greatly. Sometimes it's done so because people say, "Oh, we're in a scientific age. That's irrelevant. That has nothing to do." Other people say there are more practical things, that God is a figment of our imagination. It's a cane we don't need to help us get along. And other

people, more vigorously, will say, "Love of God and the love of religion? All you're doing is adding hatred and despair into the world."

In fact, there's a category in North America we call nones. Not N-U-N-S but N-O-N-E-S: the large number of people in North America and Europe who practise no religion at all. And while it's not true in all parts of Canada, the United States, and Europe, most priests and most of you lay people will say, "If you go to church on Sunday, you see a diminishment of the numbers of people who are attending Mass and giving praise and worship to God." And that's why we need to go and say, "Why is that so important? Why does Jesus emphasize that?"

And there's no better place to start than with the life of Jesus himself, to look at what makes him tick. What is it that made the love of God so powerful in him and his testimony, and his witness to the love of neighbour? The American poet Emily Dickinson says, "Each life converges to some centre, experienced or still." And what she means by that is every one of us, every society, has a centre, a core of their being that tells us who they are, what motivates them, what they hope for, where they're going, and their deepest dreams and aspirations. And that's in the heart of each of us.

When we look at the life of Jesus, what's the core? What's the centre of his experience? He tells us time and again. He goes out at night. During the day, he's constantly giving praise and worship and thanksgiving to God for his very being as a person and for the world and the creation he made. So, what's at the heart when Jesus says, "Who do people say I am?" "I am he who manifests in the most powerful way at the centre of my being the presence, the existence of God." And that presence is filled with awe and admiration.

"So powerful is God's presence to me that I experience deeply," Jesus says, "the mercy of God: what it means to be a forgiving person. And that's where I learned, through my prayer and meditation and loving God, to be able to forgive my enemies, especially the enemies who were

my friends, who were closest to us." Jesus draws on the strength of the love of God to inspire him to love his neighbour. And most beautifully of all, and this is especially important in these times, where there's so much trouble and darkness and despair, Jesus keeps alive the spirit of hope. There is in Jesus a depth of hope that is wider, larger than this world, than anything we can imagine. And that deep hope comes from his love of God, our Father.

We need to love our neighbour. We need to hope. We need to love God. We need to learn to forgive. That's the heart of all the commandments.