

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

November 4, 2018

The three basic items that are worn by devout Orthodox or Conservative Jews during morning and evening prayer are the head covering, or *kippah* in Hebrew, the prayer shawl, or *tallit*, and the phylacteries, which are leather straps connected to two small leather boxes, known in Hebrew as *tefillin*. Each of these leather straps is anchored with a box. One of the boxes is worn on the biceps, the right or left bicep, depending on whether the wearer is right or left-handed. The leather strap is then wound seven times around the arm. The second *tefillin* box is placed on the forehead at the hairline, with the straps going around the back of the head, connected at the top of the neck with a special knot, and hanging in front on each side. The *tefillin* is worn during morning and evening prayer by men who adhere to either the Orthodox or Conservative branches of the Jewish faith, although some women in Conservative congregations also wear these garbs for prayer.

Within the *tefillin* leather boxes are placed four biblical passages written on parchment, two are from the *Book of Exodus* and two are found in the *Book of Deuteronomy*. These passages remind the Israelite peoples to keep the Passover, to dedicate your first-born to God, keep the commandments and to Love the Lord God. In these passages they are reminded to “tie these commands on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder”, thus is found the origin and the purpose of the *tefillin*.

One of these four passages, *Deuteronomy* 6:4-9, is known as the *Shema*, taken from the first words of this passage in Hebrew *Shema Yisrael*, meaning *Hear, O Israel*. This passage is found, in part, in our first reading today. The *Shema* serves as the centerpiece of the Jewish prayer service and is recited in the evening and morning. The *Shema* is the most important part of the prayer service. This practice is even found in the Catholic Church, as the *Shema* passage is read during the first Sunday night prayer, as found in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, which all clergy and religious are obliged to pray.

The *Shema* prayer first reminds Jews of the monotheistic nature of God—that he is one. They are also reminded that God is to be loved with the totality of their being.

Considering today's Gospel, drawn from Chapter twelve of the Gospel of Mark, a lot has transpired since last Sunday's Gospel reading, where Jesus encounters blind Bartimaeus in Jericho. Since that event, Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, cleansed the Temple, related the parable of the wicked tenants, a story that had strong connections to Jesus coming passion and death, and answered questions concerning the paying of taxes and the resurrection.

Today's Gospel reading is Jesus' response to a question put to him by a scribe: Which command is the greatest of all? A scribe in Jesus' generation was a professional who exercised functions that would be associated today with lawyers, journalists, government ministers or financiers. Scribes would copy documents, an invaluable work when printing presses did not yet exist. They would create copies of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and of the entire Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). Scribes would be very familiar with the Scriptures, so the Scribe was asking Jesus a rhetorical question—he already knows the answer but wants more to challenge Jesus than to get an answer from him. The relationship between Scribes and Jesus could be very strained, given the close association between Scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus responded by reciting the *Shema*, (Hear, O Israel...) an answer the Scribe would consider correct. The Scribe rightly understood that the *Shema* passage encapsulated the totality of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christians have a somewhat equivalent passage—John 3:16, which is a very good encapsulation of the New Testament: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This encounter between Jesus and the Scribe marks the only time where an agreement is found between the two.

But Jesus continues. The *Shema* is only the first part of what Jesus considers to be a two-part answer. While one must acknowledge love of God as the greatest commandment, love of neighbour must necessarily supplement love of God. Jesus again turns to Scripture to complete his answer. He quotes *The Book of Leviticus 19:18: Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among you people but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.* Chapter 19 of *The Book of Leviticus* relates a series of moral commands drawn from the Ten Commandments, along with maintaining ritual purity and avoiding occult

practices. This chapter also includes reminders of one's responsibilities towards one's neighbour; to not defraud your neighbour, to leave a portion of your harvest in the field for the sustenance of your poor neighbours, to avoid slander and to judge your neighbour with justice.

Jesus is picking up on another tradition from the Old Testament just as valid as that expressed in the *Shema*. To the *Shema* he rightly adds love of neighbour, for they are related to each other, as close as two sides of the same coin.

The Scribe acknowledges Jesus' answer. Jesus answered very well. He gave, in fact, more than what the Scribe asked for. The Scribe also knew that love of God and love of neighbour were dearer to God than the sacrifices offered up in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites had built a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem for the purpose of offering up sacrifices to God, but even this was out-weighed by the simple command to love God and your neighbour as yourself. Recognizing the truth of his answer by paying him the ultimate compliment: He reminded him that he was: "not far from the Kingdom of God".

The leather box on the *tefillin*, worn for prayer by devout Orthodox and Conservative Jews to this day, are incidentally the size of a large nutshell, which reminds me of the expression, "can you put that into a nutshell", which means "can you encapsulate the essence of what you mean by expressing it succinctly and simply?" The *Shema* is an effective way of doing that, for it helps get to the fundamental necessities of the faith. To find, to use another expression, "where the rubber hits the road".

The *Shema* and Jesus' supplemental teaching remind us to love God and neighbour. When this is unpacked, we find that the Ten Commandments express the same. One can divide the Ten Commandments into two sections; the first three commandments addressing our relationship with God, and the following seven addressing our relationship with our neighbour. It is right to keep this balance because, without love of neighbour, love of God can become very cerebral, abstract and individualistic. It could become very easy to allow selfishness and other vices to fester in our hearts, if we are not challenged and tempered by love of neighbour.

While love of God precedes love of neighbour, the use of a metaphor of the sun and the moon may help to better understand the necessary dual presence of love

of God and neighbour. While the sun is millions of times larger than the moon, the sun and the moon appear about the same size in the sky. The reason for this is the moon is much closer to the earth than the sun. This gives a good insight into how love of God and neighbour should play out in our lives. While we need to grow in love of God, it is often through immediate and tangible acts that show love of neighbour, who is very close to us, that the God is expressed. The Apostle John puts it well in his letter:

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 1 John 4.20.

It is through our expression of love of neighbour, that the love of God is given the opportunity to grow and bear fruit.

Devout Jews wear the *terfillin* so that they can wear the essence of their faith on bicep and forehead, which perhaps symbolizes their will and their intellect coming together to believe the faith and live it out. As Christians we are called to do much the same. We are handed on the dual vocation of love of God and neighbour when we were baptized. We will exercise that dual vocation in different ways, for it will be tempered by the place, time and circumstances of our life and will be directed according to our talents and strengths. Regardless, all of us must exercise, with equal fervour, love of God and neighbour.