

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, who is truly rich: the person who has great wealth or the one who is rich in the sight of God, etc.

Mark 12:28-34 – things to notice

- We have skipped ahead almost 2 chapters from last Sunday's Gospel. Jesus and the disciples have now arrived in Jerusalem. Jerusalem would have been bustling with all the visitors preparing for the Paschal (Passover) celebrations.
- A scribe come up to Jesus – notice the lack of unfavourable commentary towards him. The scribe is presented as a sincere seeker not an adversarial controversialist.
- The scribe's question about which is the greatest commandment was a common one put to rabbis and a source of much debate and discussion among Jewish scholars.
- Jesus replies without hesitation or comment about either the scribe or his question. Jesus quotes the *shema* (listen or hear) prayed by all observant Jews each morning and evening. It comes from the Book of Deuteronomy and is quoted in the first reading this Sunday.
- Note that *heart, soul, mind and strength* is a way of saying 'your whole self' – not a way of describing parts of a person or parts of the body.
- Without being asked, Jesus adds a second commandment about loving your neighbour as yourself – a quote from the Book of Leviticus (19:18).
- Jesus' reply is not particularly original – other Jewish authorities (notably Hillel) said almost the same thing.
- What is important is that the two sayings are connected by the word 'love'. Juxtaposing the two sayings is an original move on the part of Jesus.
- The scribe is impressed and paraphrases Jesus' words (Mark's way of underlining how important this text is).
- The words of Jesus are further underlined by the scribe's addition of: this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice (Greek says: is more important than *all* the holocausts and sacrifices). This is a reference to the ritual burnt offerings offered in the Temple. The point here is not to condemn ritual practices but to put

them into proper context – there can be no authentic ritual worship of God without love of God and love of neighbour.

- Now it is Jesus' turn to be impressed by the scribe. He tells him: *You are not far from the kingdom of God*. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God is here and now. The scribe's correct interpretation of the Law has brought him very close to discovering the truth about God as Jesus teaches it and, therefore, entering into a new relationship with God and other human beings.
- After witnessing this profound exchange between the scribe and Jesus, no one dares to question Jesus any more. The exchange has reduced the crowd to silence.

The Liturgical Context

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy and contains the very quote used by Jesus in the Gospel. The reading itself gives the quote its context: the Lords' favour and many blessings will flow to the people IF they keep the laws and commandments Moses is teaching them. The fundamental context is (as always) the covenant between God and the people.

Reflection

The first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy and the Gospel today are linked by the words of the Shema – the creed which observant Jews pray every morning and evening. These words come from the Book of Deuteronomy: Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. The title, Shema, comes from the Hebrew word for 'listen', the very first word of the prayer.

In a way, Shema is a call to conversion: to listen deeply with the heart and to respond to God's grace and mercy with love, faithfulness and obedience.

When a scribe asks Jesus, "Which is the first of all the commandments?", Jesus replies by quoting the Shema and then adds a quotation from the Book of Leviticus (19:18), "You must love your neighbour as yourself". According to Jesus, there is no commandment greater than these.

The scribe is impressed by Jesus' reply. His words to Jesus show he has grasped what Jesus means. In repeating what Jesus has just said in his own words, the scribe also adds, "this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice". Now it is Jesus who is impressed with the scribe's depth of understanding: that love is the very heart of obedience to God and more important even than ritual worship. The scribe's correct understanding of the Old Testament Law means he is very close to the Kingdom of God.

It also means that true faith, as Jesus teaches it, is about being in loving relationship with God *and* other human beings. Religious rituals are meant to be ways of reflecting on, savouring, remembering, celebrating and expressing that love. Sometimes they just end up as 'empty' rituals, when love has been replaced by fear, when love is absent or when we are just 'going through the motions'.

The Kingdom of God is not some far off place, but the moments when God's life breaks into the human story. Those moments bring love, wisdom, grace, compassion, generosity, forgiveness and peace. Those practiced in the things of God recognise God's presence most of all in loving relationships. If our rituals grow out of and express our sincere love for God and neighbour then they have value. We are always at risk of putting ritual above the practise of love, of thinking that we are at rights with God just by attending a liturgy, by 'paying God off', in a sense. The words of Jesus remind us of the importance of

the other part of our religious lives – the liturgy of everyday life in which we make present and visible the love, mercy and compassion of God.