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YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF

– Biblical Commentary by Father Alfredo Maggi OSM

link video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3Owhai3Qps>

Mark 12, 28-34

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one;’^o and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and 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.” And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any question.

In the temple of Jerusalem Jesus had accused the priestly caste in power to have turned the temple into a den of thieves. Not only that, he had accused the high priests to be assassins who will kill him out of interest. Naturally they want to kill Jesus, but they cannot because they are afraid of the crowd so there are a series of attacks against Jesus to try and defame him, attacks that every time Jesus manages to come out stronger. So, after the attack by the Pharisees and that of the Sadducees it is now the turn of the scribes. Let’s read in Mark’s gospel chapter 12, 28-34.

“And one of the scribes came up...” the scribes were the official theologians of the time who had already decided that Jesus must be eliminated. The evangelist had said that they search for a way to eliminate him, already in chapter 2 they had accused Jesus of being a blasphemer and therefore he had to die. *“..one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”* The scribe’s question is not to learn, he already knows the answer, but he wants to control Jesus’ position because Jesus has a fairly detached attitude towards the commandments. What is the most important commandment? The first of all the commandments is the commandment that God also observes and what is the commandment that God

observes? To rest on the Sabbath. Therefore the observance of the rest on the Sabbath is equivalent to the observance of the whole law. Transgression of the Sabbath is tantamount to the transgression of the whole law and for this reason it is punished with death. And Jesus had not observed the Sabbath, he had transgressed various times on this day. So the question was not to learn but to control and accuse.

“Jesus answered, “The first is,...” and here Jesus’ answer is surprising because the scribe asked him what is the first, the most important of all the commandments. Well Jesus does not answer with any commandment. Jesus refers to the Shemà Israele, Hear, O Israel, the prayer that the Jews must recite twice a day, the morning and the evening, that is found in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 7,4, but he does not mention the 10 commandments *“‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one;⁰ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ..”* Jesus adds to the Hebrew text the possessive to show the immediacy, the strength of this command, *“...and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”* But for this authentic love towards God one must translate into love for others and then Jesus adds to this prayer a precept taken from the book of Leviticus chapter 19 and says *“ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”*

So there is an absolute love for God and a relative love for others. This is the teaching for the Jewish community, but not for the community of Jesus. In Jesus’ community there is only one commandment where the love for God is not asked for because Jesus’ God does not absorb mankind, but communicates his energy and Jesus will say *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”* (John 13, 34) And Jesus, after saying this, confirms to the scribes that there is not a commandment more important than this *“And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher;...”* now finally the scribe calls Jesus teacher, he recognized his teaching, *“..you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he;”* and in his reply the scribe omits life, and says *“..and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself,..”* and here the scribe understands something new *“..is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* Already the Prophet Hosea had said, it was the Lord that was speaking, *“I want love, mercy and not sacrifice.”* It is this that the Lord wants and that Jesus has come to repurpose, not a sacrifice to God, but a love towards others. This is more important than all the burnt offerings and all the sacrifices.

Well, *“..when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”* Why is he not far, but not near? Because to enter into the kingdom conversion is needed and conversion is based on three attitudes that Jesus requires: instead of accumulating for oneself, to share generously with others, rather

than rising above others, to lower oneself and be with the last ones and rather than commanding to serve, but this is difficult for a scribe.

The evangelist concludes that “..no one dared to ask him any question.” but there is no reaction from the scribe, he does not accept the invitation to be part of the kingdom. His was a theoretical question, a scholastic, theological opinion, remaining within his tradition and does not accept the invitation of Jesus, also because to enter the kingdom he would have to lower himself and put himself to service, and this to the illustrious theologian, to the official theologian who held an important position in society is almost impossible.