

# Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

## Year B



**FIRST READING**  
Deuteronomy 6:2–6

**PSALM**  
Psalm 18:2–4, 47, 51

**SECOND READING**  
Hebrews 7:23–28

**GOSPEL**  
Mark 12:28–34

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### PRAYER

#### Psalm 18:2–4, 47, 51

I love you, O LORD, my strength.  
The LORD is my rock, my fortress,  
and my deliverer,  
my God,  
my rock in whom I take refuge,  
my shield,  
and the horn of my salvation,  
my stronghold.  
I call upon the LORD,  
who is worthy to be praised,  
so I shall be saved from my enemies.  
The LORD lives! Blessed be my rock,  
and exalted be the God of my salvation,  
Great triumphs he gives to his king,  
and shows steadfast love  
to his anointed,  
to David and his descendants forever.

### READING THE WORD

#### First Reading

##### Deuteronomy 6:2–6

Now this is the commandment-- the statutes and the ordinances-- that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

#### Second Reading

##### Hebrews 7:23–28

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high

priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

#### Gospel

##### Mark 12:28–34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he 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; 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 neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

## HEARING THE WORD

### “The Heart of Life”

What is central to human life? This question has occupied philosophers, theologians and all thoughtful people from time immemorial. Various religious, philosophical, social and even political systems provide wide-ranging answers. Today’s readings respond to this question from the Christian perspective.

The first reading contains the passage considered by many as central to the entire OT. It is known as the great “Shema”. This Hebrew word conveys a simple command – “Hear!” Despite its simplicity, this twice-repeated command identifies two central elements of Israelite faith and life.

Like the entire book of Deuteronomy, our passage contains the words of Moses spoken to the Israelites who are about to enter the Promised Land and begin their new life there. Moses led these people through the desert and knew how difficult it was for them to remain consistently trustful and faithful to their God. Concerned about their future, he presents them with a set of detailed instructions on how to conduct themselves so that their future may be assured. “Shema” stands at the very heart of these diverse instructions.

The first “Shema” is a command to hear and obey Moses’ instructions with great diligence, as the people’s

survival and prosperity in the new land will depend on their obedience to God’s law/instructions. However, based on past experience, Moses knows that exhortations to obedience alone will not suffice. He had done this before, but often with little success. Therefore, Moses pronounces the second “Shema”.

This second exhortation to “hear” is very different. First, Moses exhorts Israel to hear that “the Lord is our God, the Lord alone”. The Hebrew word translated here as “the Lord” is the personal name of the God of Israel revealed in Exodus 3:14 as “I am, who I am”. By using God’s own name together with a double statement that this God alone is Israel’s God, Moses is creating a powerful confession of faith and a call for utter loyalty. In their new land, the Israelites will continuously face temptations to worship and follow the gods of their neighbors. Knowing this, Moses issues a forceful call for unswerving faithfulness to the God who brought them out of Egypt. There can be no other God for this people.

The second part of this “Shema” contains the memorable call to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”. Love implies a commitment that goes far beyond performing rituals and following the rules. Love means the internal and external adherence to God that involves the entire person and his or her life. The Israelites understood

the ‘heart’ as the center of thinking and willing, the ‘soul’ as the source of life itself, and ‘strength’ as the life force. Thus, Moses calls for the complete and total engagement of the human person in pursuing a life centered on God. Such a life will naturally result in obedience to God’s commands. With its double call to utter loyalty to and ardent love of God, the “Shema” unambiguously defines what is central to the nation’s existence; it identifies the heart of Israelite life.

The second reading continues with the presentation of the priesthood of Jesus. In today’s passage, the author emphasizes the permanence of Jesus’ priesthood, his holiness and his legitimacy as the high priest. Unlike the human priests whose term of service ended with death, Jesus’ priesthood, like Jesus himself, is everlasting. Therefore, without any interruption, Jesus constantly represents his faithful people before God, thereby granting them permanent access to the Father. As a person without sin, Jesus was holy and blameless. Unlike human priests, he did not need to offer sin sacrifices for himself. Rather, his sacrifice on the cross was a final, once and for all action which achieved permanent reconciliation between God and sinners. The legitimacy of his priesthood did not come through any institution or human appointment. It came through the divine oath described in Hebrews 7:20. The entire passage

is meant to remind Christians that Jesus, their priest, guarantees them permanent access to God and ensures their own holiness through the forgiveness of sins. Through him they have access to the Father and the assurance of eternal life. Thus, Jesus is the center, the heart of their faith and their Christian life.

The scribe who conversed with Jesus in the gospel story was probably somewhat confused. He was a professional who studied and taught the Jewish law. The law contains 613 commandments. The scribes were engaged in on-going arguments seeking to prioritize and rank them according to their importance. It was easy, even for a trained professional, to wonder and be confused as to which commandment should be considered most important. The scribe did not come to test Jesus, rather he sought Jesus' opinion in this matter.

Jesus' answer is remarkably simple but profound. True to his Jewish faith, Jesus cites the "Shema" as the first and central commandment. Complete loyalty to and utter love for God comprise the most important and the central commandment of the law, and the focus for human life. Surprisingly, the commandment identified by Jesus, as the second in importance, comes from Leviticus 19:18, and demands the love one's neighbor as oneself. The true significance of Jesus' statement, lies beyond establishing a hierarchy of commandments. By citing these two commandments together,

Jesus indicates that loyalty to and love of God must be accompanied by love for one's fellow human beings. This association shows that, for Jesus, the life of a true believer is governed entirely by love, and that the love for God must extend to the love for the other. Following Jesus, the scribe merged the two commandments into one statement adding that these two, loyalty to and love for God and the "other", take priority over acts of worship such as sacrifices and burnt offerings. Seeing that the scribe had adequately identified the central principles for human life, Jesus affirmed that he was "not far from the kingdom of God". Jesus indicated that by knowing that the love of God and of the neighbor were the heart of life, the scribe was ready to allow God to rule his life entirely, just as the Shema demanded.

While deciding on life's priorities may be difficult, today's readings identify them without hesitation. Moses knew that the only way to keep his people loyal and obedient, was to ensure that they committed themselves to God sincerely and entirely, not superficially. Such commitment and loyalty can only be achieved through an interior devotion that involves the entire person, through love. For the author of Hebrews, Jesus, the high priest of the new covenant, continuously represents his faithful before God. Having him as the center of one's life, means being permanently united with God. Following Jesus' lead, the scribe was able to iden-

tify the love of God and of one's neighbor as the central commandment of the law. Having this commandment as the "heart of life" makes the person a citizen of God's kingdom. The believer who knows and lives by this commandment can only concur with the Psalmist in the words "I love you, O Lord, my strength".

## **LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD**

There is a saying that God created us with a mouth and two ears so that we may listen twice and speak only when necessary. Listening goes beyond hearing because hearing employs only the ears, but listening needs both the ears and the heart. Today's liturgy invites us to be people who not only hear the Word of God but who also listen to it deep within our heart, so that what we have heard may bear fruit in our lives.

The first reading tells us about the impact of God's commandments on our lives. We are invited to listen and make the tenets of the Ten Commandment part and parcel of our lives. Listening with the heart helps us to live the commandments in a complete and uncompromising manner. When we listen with the heart we employ our heart, soul and strength; therefore, the word of God takes root in us.

The Israelites had priests who were mediators between God and his people. As human beings they

would die and be replaced by successors who carried on their work. But Christ became the perfect high priest, the mediator who never dies. By sacrificing himself for us through his death and resurrection, he won for us a new status as children of God. Jesus offered himself for us before the Father; he became the sacrifice for our redemption.

The Gospel reading attests to the love of God for us and communicates what he expects of us. The Ten Commandments are there to guide us and not to put fear in us. They help us see how beneficial it is when we love God and neighbour. The commandments have been summarized into two parts: love for God and love for neighbour. The first three commandments are concerned with love for God with all our heart and soul. When we truly love him, we will not need to create false images of him, but will accept him in faith with our whole being.

This will also lead us to follow his commandments. Thus, we will respect the name of him who created all things, and has power to do all things. Out of love we will not misuse his name by swearing or calling on his name in vain.

The love we nurture after listening to God's word helps us to respect his day of rest and use it well enough to bear fruits of faith. The Lord's Day is a day of prayer, of sharing with others and of rest, so that we will be refreshed and re-energized.

The remaining seven commandments are extensions of our love for God, because if we say we love God and keep his word then we will be able to see him in our neighbour. We will thus be concerned about the needs and welfare of our neighbours. We will be sensitive to the world around us and be able to share with others.

All these commandments are easy to follow when we listen to the word of God. The one who listens develops an understanding of God and finds it appropriate to give himself/herself every day for God and neighbour. Our life will only make sense if we live according to the precepts of God, for in doing so, we will be able to rejoice like the Psalmist, who has experienced God as his refuge and stronghold. Listening brings life because it leads to a deep and life-giving encounter with God.

## PROVERB

*“A listening ear leads to life, but a deaf ear leads to death.”*

## ACTION

### Self-examination:

Do I keep the Ten Commandments? Which ones pose a particular difficulty for me?

How much time do I spend in meditating on the word of God?

### Response to God:

My prayer this week will focus on expressing my love for God and deep appreciation for his revealing himself to me and making me a believer.

### Response to your World:

I will spend some minutes every day studying the word of God with the help of a commentary or another book with daily biblical reflections. In our group we will have a guided session of meditating on the Word of God following the Lectio Divina method.

## PRAYER

*Dear Lord,  
your words are spirit and life.  
Grant me an open ear  
and a listening heart  
to hear you through your words;  
teach me to make your word  
active in my life.  
May I not be a passive  
but an active listener  
and doer of your word,  
someone who welcomes  
your word into every area  
of his/her life.  
We ask this  
through the Word of God,  
Jesus Christ  
our perfect high priest.  
Amen.*