

Gospel Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, 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.” The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, He is One and there is no other than he. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Homily Feast of St Patrick 2023

"You are not far from the Kingdom of God." (Mark 12:28-34)

These are the consoling words of Jesus to anyone who follows the teaching in today's Gospel: to love God and neighbor.

This teaching is known as the Golden Rule. It is Christ's summary of the 10 Commandments – the first three of which are about loving God and the seven others, about loving our neighbor. If we keep these - Jesus says – we are not far from the Kingdom of God.

Why do we sometimes find it so difficult to love God and neighbor?

We can find an answer in the example of St Patrick (and today's Gospel isn't chosen for St Patrick, it's the regular Gospel for today, ...but it fits perfectly, and we know there are no coincidences with God, right!)

Why do we sometimes find it so difficult to love God and neighbor?
St Patrick tells us in his own words:

Back with his family, surrounded by all that was safe and familiar, he kept God to one side. But like many of us when we are stressed or afraid, Patrick, captured and taken into slavery - alone and isolated in a foreign land, wrote about himself that,

“There I sought Him and there I found Him.”

When everything is well with us, we can become oblivious to God, oblivious to neighbor. It is perhaps only when we suffer a little, that we become sensitive to the needs of others and of our personal need for God. Patrick turned his suffering over to God and became more than a disciple. Having escaped his captors and found his way home he asked permission to return to Ireland as a missionary.

I imagine he was more than surprised to find himself appointed bishop. The gentle disciple became a vibrant apostle – an ambassador for Christ. And out of love for both God and neighbor, returned to the land of his captivity with the Good News of the Gospel.

An Irish poet captured the grace of St Patrick's conversion perfectly, writing:

'But well for him whose feet have trod
The weary road of earthly strife
Yet from the sorrows of his life
Builds ladders to be nearer God.' (Lament. Oscar Wilde)

Stolen away from his family and working as a slave in the fields caring for animals, Patrick, in his emptiness, had turned to God and discovered that God was not very far away at all. And again, the responsorial of today's Mass captures the moment of Patrick's conversion where the psalm says: "I am the Lord your God: hear my voice."

Using local imagery, he compared his Christian life to the stone walls lining the fields of ancient Ireland. He wrote:

‘I was like a stone lying in deep mud; and he that is mighty came and - in his mercy - lifted me up and put me on top of the wall. Therefore, I ought to shout out aloud and return something to the Lord for the great mercy he has shown me now and for all ages.’

The mercy God showed Patrick was this: the gift of faith became alive in him. It is faith that Patrick celebrates, not that he escaped slavery, or became an influential leader, but that he came to know the God he had ignored when life was good.

And in response to this knowledge of God, Patrick returned - love for love - and found that he was not far from the Kingdom of God.

Wherever he might be, whatever situation, in his choice to love God and neighbor, Patrick found - around him on all sides - the blessing of God in every aspect of his life.

And so, he left us his most beautiful prayer:

Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me,
Christ in the heart of every one who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me.

To whole heartedly love God and neighbor comes from the knowledge that we are first loved by God.

May He bring us all together into everlasting life.

St Patrick, pray for us. Amen