

Homily - Mark 12: 28-34
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B
31st October, 2021 – Sooeey/ Riverstown

There is a wonderful Bluegrass song by Rhonda Vincent whose album won the Grammy in the year in 2018 and this song is titled: “You don’t love God if you don’t love your neighbor”. And in it, she would say:

There are many people, who will say they're Christians and they live like Christians on the Sabbath day but come Monday morning, till the coming Sunday they will fight their neighbor all along the way

Oh you don't love God

If you don't love your neighbor...and she goes on to sing...

If you gossip about him, if you never have mercy
If when your neighbor gets into trouble, and you don't try to help him...then you don't love your neighbor and you don't love God.

And she keeps singing...

There's a God Almighty and you've got to love Him
if you want salvation and a home on high

If you say you love Him while you hate your neighbour
then you don't have religion, you just tell a lie.

It is an amazing song that captures today's Gospel perfectly.

In today's Gospel, a Scribe asks Jesus to summarize the most important of the Mosaic Laws in one sentence. And, Jesus cites the first sentence of the Jewish *Shema* prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength". Then, He adds its complementary law which we see in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". Thus, Jesus says that true religion is loving God and loving our fellow human beings at the same time.

In her book, **The Whisper Test**, Mary Ann Bird shares a critical episode in her life. She was born with a cleft palate. When she started school, her classmates let her know that she was different: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. If they asked what happened to her lip, she would tell them that she fell and cut it on a piece of glass. For her, it felt more acceptable to say that she'd been injured rather than being born different. Along the way, Mary Ann became convinced that no one outside her family could love her. However, when she got to 2nd grade, she was assigned to a teacher, Ms. Leonard,

who was happy and sparkly, the kind of instructor all the kids loved.

Now, every year in school, the students were required to take hearing test. When the day came for Mary Ann to take hers, she was supposed to stand at a distance, cover one ear, and listen closely for something the teacher would whisper to her, so as to repeat it herself. Usually the teacher would say something like “The sky is blue,” or “What color are your shoes? But that day Ms. Leonard spoke seven words that changed this little girl’s life and they were: “I wish you were my little girl” – a moment she knew she was loved just as she was, and her life was changed. Love can do that. When you know that someone loves you just as you are, it transforms your life.

St. Augustine says: Love God and do what you please, because, he says “the soul that is trained to love God will do nothing to offend the one who is to be loved”. Well! It is a challenge for us to go beyond ourselves and to love all.

In the 1862 French historical masterpiece ‘*Les Miserables*’ by **Victor Hugo**, we come across Jean Valjean who spent 19 years in prison for the crime of stealing a loaf of bread to save his sister’s son from

starvation. And, by the time Jean Valjean was released, all that he had and all that he knew in life beyond prison was gone. Desperate and alone with no place to go, Jean Valjean, formerly prisoner number 24601 knocks on the door of Bishop Myriel. And, during the night, he awakens and steals the Bishop's silverware and silver plates, and runs off. He is arrested and brought back to the Bishop. But then, to the dismay of the police and to the astonishment of Jean Valjean, Bishop denies the charges and says: “I had gifted those silverware and silver plates to him”. And, he would even give him the most valuable silver candle sticks in the Church – an act of ‘altruism, kindness, compassion and love’ that would eventually remove Jean Valjean’s chains of hatred, mistrust and anger and he would say:

My life was a war that could never be won . . .

Yet why did I allow that man
to touch my soul and teach me love?

He treated me like any other

He gave me his trust

He called me brother.

And that is what Christianity is all about dear brothers and sisters.

In the words of St. Paul, ‘we should be eager to present ourselves as acceptable to God in loving Him and

loving our neighbor'. And someone who lived this spirit in recent history is Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who because of her love for the poorest of the poor came to be called as 'the Saint of the Gutters'. And she used to often say: "Share with the poor and the needy around you, 'your smile, your word, your time and your belongings'. See God's presence in the people you meet daily and treat them as children of God. He wants us to love Him in every single person we meet, when we meet that person."

Dear brothers and sisters, following the exhortation of Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Gaudete et Exsultate*, "The call to holiness in today's world", let us pray 'that we may have the grace to be holy by living our life with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves'. God bless you all, **Amen.**