



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Hear!"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Deuteronomy 6: 1-9
Second Reading Hebrews 7: 23-28
Gospel Mark 12: 28-34

שמע ישראל...

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Eχad. V-ahavta et Adonai Eloheχα b-χol l'vavχα u-v-χol naf'sh'χα u-v-χol m'odeχα.

No, your rector isn't "speaking in tongues"... well, actually yes he *is*! What I just read was the "Shema", the central Jewish statement of belief taken from the book of Deuteronomy (as we just heard it read in our first reading today). And it was in Hebrew, our spiritual ancestral language: the way our Lord would have learned this Creed while growing up with Joseph and Mary in Nazareth.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Jesus has been approached by one of the Jewish Scribes- a kind of lay reader in the local synagogue- a person who had professional interest in knowing the fine points of the complicated Jewish religious laws. For him, it is a legitimate question to ask which of all of the commandments and laws is the most important. His question might appear at first

to be bating Jesus- trying to get him into trouble. But Jesus takes him seriously, and recites the Shema- the statement of belief that I just read. Nothing remarkable about that- all of those present must have nodded their heads in pious agreement. But then Jesus does the unexpected, as he likes so often to do- he adds something that wasn't usually recited as part of the Shema: a verse from the book of Leviticus: "You must love your neighbor as yourself." The scribe agrees with Jesus at this novel, but meaningful combination of powerful texts, and Jesus responds to him with the encouraging words, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

In olden times, say, before 1976- this passage used to be recited every Sunday at Holy Communion if the congregation wasn't already reciting all of the Ten Commandments (which I have to say was pretty rare). Indeed, our 7:30 congregation, which used the traditional language Rite One Eucharist, still has this option. What this does is to firmly reconnect us with our spiritual forebears, the Jews, and to recognize the importance of their faith as the foundation for our own. No less a person than our Lord himself makes these two statements the basis of his personal faith, and that should be enough for us. Certainly, as Christians, we have had to go beyond this, and our own Nicene Creed involves us in some complicated, but probably necessary fine points of theology in deciding just who this Jesus was who spoke in this way.

Beyond the theology, however, we have the simple bedrock of personal faith and personal action, and these are so well articulated in what Jesus recites today. In his words we see the balance between love of God and love of neighbor that seems to elude us in our attempts to justify ourselves and what we do. We often love spiritual laws more than the scribes and Pharisees did, because they can be used as weapons for our cause, whatever cause that might be at the time. Indeed, we so often have so many gods in our pantheon- gods of personal accomplishment, gods of successful business, gods of wealth, gods of security- that we still need to hear that initial phrase of the Shema: the Lord is ONE!

That is why Jesus reminds us of the verse in Deuteronomy that puts God first. Indeed, we are to connect to him with all our heart, soul and strength. After that, there's not much left! But what is left is to be directed at others- in love. The self, the ego, the personality is not forgotten, but notice that it is found in these verses only in relationship with the other: it is only by loving the other that we truly discover who we are.

Note also that Jesus reminds us that the Jewish creed doesn't say that we should fear God- not in this verse. The Old Testament gets a bad rap for allegedly presenting God only with a frowning face- a God of thunder, of punishment, of righteous anger. But here, in the central statement of Jewish belief we are told that we must love him. Later in the verse from Deuteronomy we hear why: God is involved in our lives...in our history...and he wishes us well- not only that: he will *do* us good. For the Jews, this meant the Promised Land and many children. For us, who are not so geographically limited, we see our milk and honey flowing in lives well lived, in joy in God's creation, in knowing and feeling that we play an important part in God's plan for the world and its salvation.

These two important statements about our responsibility to God and to our neighbor, uniting us as they do with our spiritual forebears the Children of Israel and their descendents who recite this creed even today, are too important to forget. In the words of Deuteronomy, we need to "write them on our heart" and keep them always in view. If we can do that, then we'll be like that pious scribe in today's Gospel- we won't be far from the kingdom of God.