

Twenty-third Sunday *per annum*

Year A, 2026

Ez 33:7-9

Rom 13:8-10

Ps 95

Mt 18:15-20

The law and its fulfillment

Today, I want to reflect with you on the passage we have in our second reading, from St Paul's letter to the Romans.

The passage is brief, so let's hear it again, so that it's fresh in our ears:

Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

So important was this message to St Paul, that he repeated it substantially in another of his letters, the one to the Galatians, where we read: *"you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. The whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"* (Gal 5:13-14).

St Paul is rather clear. When we love one another, we fulfill the law. Paul gives a partial list of the commandments: no adultery, no killing, no stealing, no coveting ... *"and whatever other commandment there may be."* All commandments, he says, can be summed up in one simple saying: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* The

commandments, then, teach us about love, about how to love our neighbor. And the first law of love of neighbor is this: do no harm to your neighbor. Or in Paul's words: *"Love does no evil to the neighbor."*

Where does St Paul get this summary of the law, *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself"*? Many people will quickly think of the teaching of Jesus, and rightly so, when he is asked by a scholar of the law which is the greatest commandment in the law (Mt 22:35ff). Jesus responds that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But then Jesus follows up with the second greatest commandment, which he says is *like* the first: *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Jesus, knowing the scheming of the scholars of the law, will not allow the full teaching and meaning of the law to be compromised. *"The whole law,"* Jesus continues, *"and the prophets depend on these two commandments."* The whole law depends not only on the greatest commandment – to love God with all our being – but also and inseparably on the second greatest commandment – to love our neighbor as ourself.

These words, though, about loving neighbor as self are not original to Jesus. No. In fact, Jesus is quoting the scriptures, from the Torah, one of the five first books of the Old Testament, one of the books of the Law, *the book of the Law par excellence*, Leviticus, where in chapter 19 we read: *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."*

In fact, in chapter 19 of Leviticus, there is a restatement of the Ten Commandments, but this time, with more detail, more explanation, and God undersigns, as it were, each commandment as he gives it. Listen to a few excerpts from this chapter. Listen to how concrete and practical the commandments are. Listen to how God repeatedly gives the commandment and then the justification and authority for that commandment: *"I am the Lord."* I will read them slowly, so that we can reflect on them, taking in the wisdom of God as found in his word, which may challenge us as it calls us to conscience, to account. But take heart: *"[God] wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands give healing"* (Job 5:18).

Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. Each of you revere your mother and father, and keep my sabbaths. I, the Lord, am your God.

Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the old... I am the Lord.

Do not turn aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourselves. I, the Lord, am your God.

Do not turn to ghosts or consult spirits, by which you will be defiled. I, the Lord, am your God.

You shall not steal. You shall not deceive or speak falsely to one another. You shall not swear falsely by my name... I am the Lord.

Do not act dishonestly in using measures of length or weight or capacity. You shall have a true scale and true weights... I, the Lord, am your God.

You shall not exploit your neighbor. You shall not commit robbery. You shall not withhold overnight the wages of your laborer. You shall not insult the deaf, or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.

You shall not go about spreading slander among your people; nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake. I am the Lord.

You shall not hate any of your kindred in your heart. Reprove your neighbor openly so that you do not incur sin because of that person. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God.

This, then is God's law, and it is a law of love. We cannot love God or neighbor while violating these laws. These things the Lord our God has commanded. They are not options. And these commandments are an expression of love, which does no harm, no evil to another – not to God, not to neighbor, not to self.

The Law, we must understand, is not something external to us, something alien, some foreign imposition on our wills and desires and freedoms. The Law of God is within us. God has already written it in our hearts.

Listen to how God speaks about this to his people in the book of Deuteronomy: *“For this command which I am giving you today is not too wondrous or remote for you. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to the heavens to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?’ Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?’ No, it is something very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it”* (Dt 30:11-14).

I want to cite for you another passage, this time from the prophet Jeremiah, where God reveals a similar thing: *“But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel... I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people”* (Jer 31:33).

God’s law is written upon our hearts; it is in our mouths and in our hands. We have only to do it, to carry it out. This is what the law teaches. This is what the prophets teach. And so Jesus, the great Teacher, rightly said that the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments: our loving God above all things and our neighbor as ourself. Knowing the law, loving the law, and most important acting upon the law – which is an expression of love – is what makes us free, truly free.

The law of God, then, is an expression of what it means to be really, truly, authentically human. And so by his law God teaches us what it means to be human, what it means to believe and to behave in a way that is consistent with the ends and purposes for which he

made us – to be like him: merciful, compassionate, faithful, righteous, and true ... in a word, to be holy, as he, the Lord our God, is holy. This is how much God loves us, that he teaches us the way to be, the way to act. God, like a good teacher, like a good father, guides us by the rules he gives us so that we can grow into freedom, into goodness, into holiness.

To rebel against the law, understood in this way, is really to rebel against human nature itself. It is, ultimately, suicidal, as is all sin. And God would spare us from that death, and so he teaches us by his law, the fulfillment of which is love.

There is only one, though, who has fulfilled the law of love perfectly and completely and wholly: Jesus Christ. And there on the cross is the demonstration and perfection of the law of love, as he gave his life so that we who were dead in our sin (Eph 2:1, 5), might have new and abundant life in him.

Circling back to the teaching of St Paul in our passage from Romans, we are taught to “*owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another.*” Love, then, is our debt to one another. I owe each of you, each person I encounter and cross, who are all my neighbor, love, which does no harm, no evil, but which does good and gives grace.

And so I pray: Lord Jesus, give me this grace, that by the power of your Spirit at work in me, I may come to imitate you and so give witness to the glory and goodness of God by following the law of love, which the Father has written into my heart. Amen.