30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Love as the Meaning of Life
Deuteronomy 34:1–12; Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17; Matthew 22:34–46

Forty years in the wilderness, leading a difficult and often obstinate people. Such was the life of Moses. At last he stands on a mountain ridge overlooking the promised land, the land he had been called to lead his people into. Yet after all those years of labour and sacrifice, he will never enter it himself. He sees it only from afar; and there, in the land of Moab, Moses, the servant of the Lord, dies and is buried.

We might well ask: where's the justice in such an ending? How can God deny this reward to such a faithful servant, one who had given his entire life to God's service?

Death raises questions like that. It certainly did for the psalmist, who reflected deeply on the reality of human mortality:

> You turn humanity back into dust,
> saying, "Return to dust, you children of mortals" ...
>
> They are like the grass which in the morning is green,
> but in the evening is dried up and withered.

When we're young, life seems to stretch out endlessly before us. Yet sooner or later we come to realise that we're mortal.

At first glance, that may seem a rather bleak truth. Yet it can also be the beginning of wisdom. To acknowledge our mortality can be the first step towards God. It's the beginning of the search for what truly matters. The psalmist came to that discovery. Having reflected on life's brevity, he found himself praying:

> Satisfy us in the morning with your constant love,
> so that we may rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.

Notice where he arrives. Not at achievement. Not at success. Not at long life. But at love. What gives meaning to our fleeting days is the experience of God's enduring love.

That was true for Moses as well. His reward lay not in entering the promised land, but in his faithfulness and willingness to serve God and God's people.

Moses' story raises a question that eventually confronts all of us: if life is finite, what gives our years their meaning?

Yesterday I marked the forty-fifth anniversary of my ordination as a priest. Reflecting on those years of ministry, I wondered: what has given them their deepest meaning. What has endured beneath the activity, the successes and failures, the joys and disappointments? What remains when everything else is stripped away?

Like the psalmist, I find myself returning to the same answer: the knowledge of God's constant love. The deepest meaning of our lives is found not first in what we accomplish or achieve, but in God's love for us and our growing response to that love.

Before we ever drew breath, we were loved by God. And that love has never slackened, nor ever will. At its heart, the Christian faith is the conviction that we are created by love, sustained by love, and called to share that love with the world.

That belief lies at the heart of today's Gospel. When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he replies:

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

For Jesus, love is the centre from which everything else takes its meaning and direction. Love God and neighbour is the very heart of Christian life.

A paraphrase captures the force of Jesus' words:

> Love God, your God, with your whole heart;
> love God with all that's in you;
> love God with all you've got!

But what exactly do we mean by love?

In everyday language, love is often reduced to a feeling. Feelings are important, but feelings come and go. Christian love is something deeper. It is a commitment, a conscious choice, an act of the will. It is the decision to orient our lives towards God and towards the good of others.

Jesus repeatedly uses one little word: *all*.

> "Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, and *all* your mind."

Jesus is not asking for a part of our lives, or even most of our lives. He’s speaking about the whole of who we are. What might that look like?

To love God with all our heart is to place God among our deepest treasures. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

What occupies our minds as we peel the potatoes at the kitchen sink, sit quietly in the garden, or lie awake before sleep? What claims our attention, our energy, and our affection? Those things reveal something about our treasures.

The question is not whether we have treasures. The question is whether God has become our greatest treasure.

To love God with all our soul means loving God with our whole life. In the Bible, the soul is not some separate spiritual component tucked away inside us. Rather, it refers to the living person in their entirety. To love God with all our soul is to offer our whole selves to God.

Yet we know there are parts of our lives we hold back. There are cherished ambitions, hidden fears, private resentments, and old wounds that we’re reluctant to place in God's hands. Loving God with all our soul means learning, little by little, to trust God with those places too.

To love God with all our mind means loving God with our thinking, questioning, searching, and understanding. Christian faith is not opposed to questions. Questions are often how faith develops. Faith is not about shutting down our minds. It's about allowing our minds to be shaped by the truth and love of God.

In all of this, we are speaking about loving God. Yet God is love. To love God is, in a sense, to love Love itself.

That's what we see in Jesus. His whole life was a living expression of divine love. He welcomed those whom others excluded. He treated with dignity those whom society despised. He forgave sinners, embraced outcasts, and even prayed for his enemies.

And then he says to us:

> "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Notice that love now turns outward.

Every time I make the sign of the cross, I am reminded of these two dimensions of love. The vertical beam points towards God. The horizontal beam reaches towards other people. The two belong together. Love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated.

Indeed, it's God's love for us that makes neighbour-love possible. Left to ourselves, we find some people difficult to love. They irritate us, disappoint us. Some wound us deeply. Yet Christian love is not about liking everyone. It's about seeking their good, whether warm feelings accompany that desire or not.

So who is my neighbour? Jesus' answer is wonderfully simple: our neighbour is whoever stands in need of our love.

Whenever I struggle with another person, I try to remember that they are loved by God no less than I am. They are not my neighbour because they share my values, opinions, beliefs, or background. They are my neighbour because God treasures them.

That changes how we see people. And it changes how we act.

Love grows through small, ordinary acts: a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, a phone call, a visit, a helping hand. None of these actions seem dramatic. Yet they matter more than we often realise.

Looking back over the years, we often discover something surprising: it is those small acts of love that have shaped the journey, quietly transforming both our lives and the lives of others.

We spend our lives learning to love. Though we often fall short, God's grace keeps calling us forward. With God's help, and the support of one another, we slowly grow into the people we were created to be. And when we look back over the journey, we discover that love has been there from the beginning: creating us, sustaining us, carrying us, and calling us onward. In the end, we find that love itself is the deepest meaning of our lives.

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