When Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Mark 12:28 One of the scribes came near and seeing Jesus and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33 and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbour as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The question asked here is important for all believers. The concern for the core or centre of the faith is widespread in the New Testament: Jesus, Paul, James and John (see below). It is also a question today: what lies at the very heart of what we believe? A contemporary summary was once given by David Jenkins (the former bishop of Durham); there is God; God is as he is in Jesus; there is hope. Naturally, we would want (and need) to say more, but as a thumbnail sketch, it is not bad at all.

This story is also found in Matthew 22:34-40 and in Luke 10:25-28 (in a different context). In Luke, it is not Jesus but a lawyer who combines the citations from Deuteronomy and Leviticus.
and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Gal 5:13–14)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 28 Although as a whole the scribes are consistently hostile in Mark, this scribe reacts positively to Jesus and asks a sincere question. In this way, Mark avoids a blanket condemnation of Judaism. In philosophy and religion, the desire for a summary statement has often led to representative “epitome” pronouncements. A contemporary of Jesus, R. Hillel, was asked a similar question but he gave a reply which does not come from the Hebrew Bible: “Do not do to anyone else what is hateful to you” (cf. Tob 4:15, Mat 7:12). The question is subtle: not which commandment is first in a series, but which commandment is above all the other commandments. Mark portrays the Scribes mostly negatively, but here the Scribe is not only positive to Jesus but is Jesus positive to him.

Verses 29-30 Jesus begins his double reply by quoting the Shema. The citation is adjusted slightly to include “mind”, while the original has heart, soul and might. There is, however, no dividing up of the human being because it really means with your whole self. The addition of “mind” may reflect a concern for the reasonableness of faith. This is in contrast to 12:17 and the honour due to Caesar. The emperors did, of course, claim the respect due to God and God alone. There is another, Markan level to the response. This community confesses Jesus as Messiah and as Son of God. Nevertheless, the Christians do not set aside the monotheism of the mother religion nor do they have a different morality.

Verse 31 Only the latter part of Lev 18:19 is cited here. In its biblical context, neighbour meant one of the chosen people. However, in the Judaism of the time and in Jesus’ teaching it means anyone and everyone. The second part of the reply is a formal response to the opening question. The reply mirrors the two tablets of the Law: the duty to God and the duty to the neighbour.

Verse 32 This is the only time in Mark that one of the religious authorities agrees with Jesus. Teacher: in the disputes of Mark 12, those trying to trick Jesus also use this address (Mark 12:14, 19), but here it is a form of respect. The scribe then builds into his response a verse from Second Isaiah: Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. (Is 45:21; cf. Ex 20:3 and Deut 4:35)

Verse 33 In his response, the scribe brings even more closely together the double commandment to love God and neighbour. Perhaps surprisingly, the scribe appends the prophetic critique of Temple worship, reflecting texts such as 1 Sam 15:22; Hos 6:6 and Mic 6: 6-8. This may reflect more the Markan critique of the Temple system, which is very evident in chs. 11-12. It may also reflect the desire for continuity in light of the destruction of the Temple.

Verse 34 This is the only use in the NT of the adverb noumechos which means “with nous”, i.e. mindfully or wisely. Jesus approves of the scribe’s reformulation and expansion of his own reply. It is a little difficult to capture the tone of Jesus’ compliment, because to be “not far” means also not to be there just yet, just like Joseph of Arimathea (15:43). The final line closes the dispute sequence. In this sequence, the essential Markan theology has been presented: God alone is due honour; God is one and there is no other; this God has anointed Jesus as Messiah. The sequence of teachings may reflect the catechesis of early Christianity. From now on, it is Jesus who poses the questions.

This story is significant in Mark for the following reasons:

1. It underlines the deep continuity between Judaism and The Way.
2. Again, in continuity with the prophets, the Temple cult is not required after its destruction.
3. God is one (a point not emphasised by Matthew and Luke); in a polytheistic world, this is vital point of continuity.
4. Jesus is now shown as the master interpreter of Scripture.
5. Jesus teaches no specific ethics in Mark, but rather a response in faith and love to the act of God.

POINTS FOR PRAYER

1. Today’s gospel brings us right to the heart of what a Christian life involves: love of God and of neighbour. Jesus tells us that having life both now and in the future is the fruit of living in a spirit of love. How have you experienced the power of love given, and received, as a source of life and vitality?
2. If you were asked what is most important in life, what would your answer be? Recall the experiences and relationships you have had. Which are the ones that you treasure most? What has particularly enriched your life? How would you encourage another person who asked you how s/he could live a full life?
3. Jesus praises the questioner as one who had answered wisely. Recall some of the wise people you have known, people who in their words and actions impressed you with their capacity to see and treasure what is important in life.

PRAYER

Lord our God, you are the one God and there is no other. Give us grace to live and heed the great commandment of your kingdom, that we may love you with all our heart and our neighbour as ourselves. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.
Unlike the other high priests, Jesus has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins.

Heb 7:23 Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24 but Jesus holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Heb 7:26 For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading will certainly be unclear for the ordinary listener! At this point in the Letter, the author is contrasting the imperfect priesthood of the Temple with the perfect priesthood of Jesus. In the mindset of the time, whatever is temporary is by definition imperfect. By contrast, whatever is permanent is perfect. Likewise, whatever needs to be repeated is by definition imperfect. Again, by contrast the once-for-all of Jesus’ sacrifice enjoyed the marks of perfection. It is not repeated because it does not need to be repeated on account of imperfection.

KIND OF WRITING

We have here a rather dense argument, combining scripture, philosophical principles, promises and historical sequence.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context is the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Like all Jewish movements of the time, the Christians too had to ask themselves where is God now to be found and encountered. Emerging Judaism became a religion of the book in the sense that God is now to be found in the Scriptures. Emerging Christianity, by contrast, proclaimed Jesus as the “locus” of our encounter with God. (Of course, for us as well the Scriptures are a place of encounter.)

At the same time, in many places, the writer depends on proof from Scripture citation, especially from the Psalms, as we see here. He also assumes a familiarity with the functioning of the high priest. Clearly, he was writing to people—Jews and Gentiles—familiar with Bible as the word of God and with Jewish tradition.

RELATED PASSAGES

The verb “to perfect” and the adjective “perfect” bounce around the Letter in an almost protagoge (Heb 2:10; 5:9, 14-6:1; 7:19; 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23). Here are key examples:

For it was fitting for him, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Heb 2:10)

This was a symbol for the time then present, when gifts and sacrifices were offered that could not perfect the conscience of the worshipper. They served only for matters of food and drink and various washings; they are external regulations imposed until the new order came. But now Christ has come as the high priest of the good things to come. He passed through the greater and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, and he entered once for all into the most holy place not by the blood of goats and calves but by his own blood, and so he himself secured eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow sprinkled on those who are defiled consecrated them and provided ritual purity, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. (Heb 9:9–14)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 23 A double contrast is intended. First, there is the old Greek problem of the one and the many. In this mindset, what is unique is better than what is plural. The “cause” of the plurality is the fact that the priests died and were replaced, i.e. imperfect.

Verse 24 In contrast to the deaths of the priests, Jesus is different because he rose from the dead and lives forever. The second contrast is between the temporary/repeated and the once-for-all / permanent. What was repeated needed to be repeated and was therefore imperfect. Jesus’ offering o himself is perfect, by contrast. It need not and even cannot be repeated.

Verse 25 The writer draws a conclusion. Using a legal term “to make intercession” (meaning to use a third party to approach someone), the writer affirms Jesus’ role as mediator. This is an accurate reception of an earlier affirmation by St Paul: Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us. (Rom 8:34)

Verse 26 This is a kind of definition, allowing the writing to delineate the character of Jesus as priest. Holy: that is attached to God. Innocent; cf. Jer 11:19; Undefiled: without sin. Separate: sinlessness himself. Exalted: in the resurrection. Jesus brings us intimately into the heart of God because of his character (v. 26), achievement (v. 27) and status (v. 28), all to be unfolded in the next few verses.

Verse 27 Again, the writer contrasts the repeated (and therefore imperfect) with the once-for-all (perfect). [Just as a matter of fact, the writer seems to be mistaken about a daily offering for the sins of the high priest.]

Verse 28 Because the Pentateuch was written by Moses and the Psalms were written by David, the oath—from Psalm 2:7—came later than the Law (the Torah). So the promise which indicated the arrival of Jesus in a way corrected the earlier dispensation in the light of the future one in Jesus. The perfection of Jesus is a resounding conclusion to the presentation thus far.

POINTERs FOR PRayer

1. In my own spirituality, what role does the intercession of Jesus play?
2. “I am with you always” — Hebrews offers the same consolation in different words.

PRAYER

God, you are ever with us, through Jesus our high priest and Emmanuel. May we know his help always. Amen.
Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God

Deut. 6:1 Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, 2 so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. 3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you rise, 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading offers the fundamental credal prayer of Judaism, the Sh’mat Israel, נצח י’sprayed twice daily. It is also a traditional final prayer before going to sleep and for use as your very last words.

The appointed reading has been expanded by including verses 1, 7-9, to give the full context. The command to love God is a response to God’s own love for the people of Israel. This is well captured in a passage from Jeremiah, where we read:

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jeremiah 31:1-3)

The following verses 7-9 have an obvious connection to the time of writing, to speak of monotheism as the idea that there is only one God to love, because love seems so spontaneous, from the heart. Has my own experience of being loved and loving in return (as the song puts it) helped me in my loving response to God?

Verse 6 The following verses 7-9 have had a big effect on the visible expression of “keeping these words.” It is important to say that priority is given to keeping these words in your hearts. Cf. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will write it on their hearts; and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

1. “Hear”: what has been my experience of hearing and being heard, in a deep and personal way? Does that human experience speak also to my hearing of God and God’s word?

2. “Love”: it may seem strange to command love, because love seems so spontaneous, from the heart. Has my own experience of being loved and loving in return (as the song puts it) helped me in my loving response to God?

3. “Keep”: to continue to be faithful within my heart and in my life is first of all a human challenge. With whom have I experienced such faithfulness? How to I “keep” my love of God alive and active today?

PRAYER

God of gracious love, may the light of your love shine in every part of who we are so that we may respond to your great love with our whole self. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
THE LITURGY

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Psalm 18 (17); Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

READINGS 1 AND 3
At times, even today, Christians can be tempted to set aside the Old Testament. In today’s Gospel, Jesus quotes the great prayer of Judaism, the Shema Yisrael, underlining the continuity of revelation between the Old and the New Testaments.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM
Psalm 18 (17) opens with a perfect response to the first reading: I love you, Lord, my strength. Such open-hearted devotion responds perfectly to Deut 6:2-6.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS
First reading
Deuteronomy 6:2-6
Our short reading today contains the central prayer of Judaism: “Listen, Israel.” It is read today because Jesus quotes it approvingly in the Gospel.

Second Reading
Hebrews 7:23-28
The Letter to the Hebrews wants to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament priesthood and so the ideal priest for us.

Gospel
Mark 12:28-34
It is not often that someone in the Gospels received pure praise from Jesus. It happens, however, today to the scribe who spontaneously approves of what Jesus says. The Gospel takes us to the heart of the matter: love of God (the first five commandments) and love of neighbour (the second five).

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS
Monday 1 November
All Saints
See the special notes for the feast.

Tuesday 2 November
All Souls
There are choices for the readings today.

Isaiah 25:6-9
Familiarity may not help us to hear the message of this passage. Usually our imagination is taken up with the powerful “graphics” (banquet, mountain, wiping of the cheek). The really big surprise is in the words: “he will destroy death forever.” Because the afterlife is a fairly late arrival in biblical teaching, this section of Isaiah is usually date to the third or even the second century BC.

Romans 5:7-21
There is no doctrine of original sin in Judaism. Paul is really working back from the grace of God in Jesus: God’s gift of universal salvation points to the human condition, universally in thrall to death and sin. Paul’s purpose is not to underline the misery of the human condition but to highlight the disproportion between the breath-taking grace of God. Notice the important words: to reign in life; the free gift; being made righteous; brings everyone life; grace was even greater.

Mark 15:33-39, 16:1-6
Central to our hope in life beyond the grace are “the great events that give us new life in Christ.” Our hope is not based on a kind of natural optimism or on eternity of the soul but on Christ and what happened for us all in his death and resurrection. Alleluia!

Wednesday 3 November
St Malachy, bishop

Romans 13:8-10
Following Jesus’ own example, Paul goes to the heart of the Gospel in a few simple phrases that anyone can understand. The difficulty lies not in understanding but in living it out, as usual.

Luke 14:25-33
The first paragraph will shock and the second paragraph will sound familiar. “Hate” is the strong way of saying “prefer to.” Jesus really did set faith relationship above “natural” ones. As for planning and failing to build…all too familiar! The message is sharp: take into account the cost of discipleship.

Thursday 4 November
St Charles Borromeo, religious

Romans 14:7-12
Paul returns to the presenting issues which triggered the letter to the Romans—the lack of mutual regard between Christians of Gentile and Jewish origin. The first sentence is not well translated in the Jerusalem Bible. It should read: For none of us lives for himself and none dies for himself. (Romans 14:7)

Luke 15:1-10
Again, Luke uses shock tactics. Shepherds had the reputation of being permanently ritually impure, just like women. This outsiders are used to express the mission of Jesus precisely to the marginalised. Did you ever wonder about the ninety-nine who, apparently, had no need of repentance?

Friday 5 November
St Martin de Porres, religious

Romans 15:14-21
Our reading today is part of the conclusion to the major arguments of Romans. We get a window into Paul’s understanding of himself, as well as some of the features of the mission, such as always going to new places where the Gospel had not yet been proclaimed.

Luke 16:1-8
As a sign of hope for us all (!), Luke consistently illustrates the Gospel using unlikely, even disreputable characters. At least the wretch thinks ahead — and so should we all.

Saturday 6 November
All Saints of Ireland

Sirach 44:1-15
This is a generous and delightful passage, inviting us to remember again all who have gone before us — not just the “canonised” of course! It might be a good idea to find an inclining language version (such as the New American Bible Revised Edition or the Revised New Jerusalem Bible).

Luke 6:17-23
In a typical “wisdom” fashion, Jesus puts before us the “two ways”, one leading to death and misery, the other to life and joy. We read only the beatitudes. Of course it is never forbidden to extend the reading.