

A reflection for the third week of Lent

All We Need is Love

Love. What verb does more work? What noun is more invoked? That's the problem. The word "love" means too much and too little.

It stands for (and justifies) just about everything; strong desires, imperial needs, an obsessive ache, murder, atrocity, mendacity. People have done things for love of others that have crushed the very objects of their obsession. They have done things for self-love that destroyed their very souls. Thus, the appeal to love is often not only trivial, it can be lethal.

There is no more misunderstood word than love. It means sex to some. Thrill to others. Feeling wonderful to most. Love should fix things, change them, renew them. It ought to make us feel better about ourselves and the world. It must make life light and easy, a joy, an ecstasy, bliss. As the song says, "Love is all you need."

Imagine the embarrassment and confusion then, when such a word, in the ironic play of God and the transcripts of history, shows up as the summation of the law and the prophets.

Yes, Jesus said it. He was responding to a question posed by a lawyer, of all people, who was wondering which commandment of the law was the greatest. His response? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, 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 neighbor as yourself.'"

Now at first sight this answer was not earthshaking in its originality. The great Shema, a prayer that devout Jews recite every morning and night, is straight from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:5). This command to love God absolutely was to be "written on the heart: and drilled into the memory of every child." Mary, we may suppose, did her job.