

Greetings to you! Today as the Communion of Churches in India (CCI) we are celebrating unity Sunday. We give thanks to God for the CNI, CSI and the Marthoma church for coming together to form this communion. This unity is based on scripture where God calls Christians to be one. Our theme for this morning is "The great commandment". In the gospel reading of St. Mark we see a scribe who came up to Jesus and asked him, "Of all the commandments which is the most important?" Jesus then responded saying "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these. The scribes question was motivated because they believed there were 613 separate commandments in the first five books of Moses, the Pentateuch and so there was always a question of priority. In the Babylonian Talmud there is a request to Shammai and Hillel two great Rabbis of the first century who had their own school to study the law. "Teach me the whole Torah while I am standing on one leg." Hillel's reply was, "Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you; this is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary." Jesus's own summary is more or less the same.

The first commandment Jesus talks about is loving God with all your heart. The heart stands as the place of love and emotions-as the centre and source of the whole inner self- with its thinking, feeling and volition. Our commitment to God comes out of our love for him. It is not for duty's sake that you should love him. Secondly, Jesus talks about loving with all our soul. All our soul means with all our life breath-with all our being-with all our life. Whether it be waking and sleeping, walking or working our lives need to revolve around the loving God, because in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). God needs to be the center of our lives. Everything that we do needs to revolve around him.

Thirdly, Jesus calls us to love him with the faculty of thinking, comprehending and reasoning. The human mind has become warped with the entry of sin and has become depraved. We use our reasoning ability to bring harm to others. For example we can use our mind to kidnap a child or we can feed our minds with perverted sexual images on the internet or through pornographic material we watch. We can claim to love God while our minds constantly are thinking, plotting and scheming things which go against the will of God. Our minds need to be transformed. Paul writing to the Romans says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Fourthly, Jesus tells us to love God with all our strength. Paul writing to the Roman states, "I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Our love for God means using our bodies in the service of God. Our bodies are the temple of God therefore we are asked to take care of it and offer it as a living sacrifice, which is holy and acceptable to God. God calls us to introspect and see how we have been using our bodies. Are we keeping our bodies holy? Or are we leading immoral lives? We are called to pour out our bodies before God, to be expended for God wherever he has placed us. Our physical strength must be used for the service of the Lord. So the first commandment is about loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

The second commandment is loving our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus infact uses Leviticus 19:18 to cite this command. We are called to love others by showing our love for them. We all liked to be loved but we are not ready to love others unconditionally. We are called not to resort to holding grudges against one another or slandering one another. The tongue has the power to kill and to heal. We are called to be people who will build up others rather than tear them down.

Our love should also be in action. It is not good enough to say kind words to a needy person but rather to see how best we can help that person. Our love for others must make us compassionate towards the poor and needy and those who are oppressed. Jesus himself says that all people will know that we are his disciples if we love one another. Love for others can only come when we have God's love in our heart. The scribe on hearing Jesus said, "You are right, teacher; you have truly said that God is one and there is no other but him; and to love him with all your heart and with all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." The challenge for us this morning is to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbor as ourselves. May God truly help us to love others as God has loved us.

*Shalom,
Paul Swarup*