

31ST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME | YEAR B

31 OCTOBER 2021

Dt 6:2-6; Heb 7:23-28; Mk 12:28b-34

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Some of you may have seen a series on Netflix – it's an Israeli television drama series – about a fictional Haredi, or strictly Orthodox, Jewish family living in Geula, in central Jerusalem. The title of the series is the Hebrew name of the family: *Shtisel*.

It's very well done, and about the only vice portrayed in the series is an excessive amount of smoking, which pervades just about every scene in the movie. You just need to ignore that as much as you can, along with the fact that the series has English subtitles, which, oddly enough, was not really a distraction.

Aside from all that – in my opinion – it's very much worth watching for the portrayal of a strictly Orthodox Jewish family and their way of life. And one aspect of that life is the Jewish custom of blessing and prayer that dominates their lives.

Dominican Fr. Peter John Cameron, in his book, *Blessing Prayers: Devotions for Growing in Faith*, gives an excellent description of this aspect of Jewish life in the introduction to the book. He writes, "In the ancient Jewish tradition, every act and every pleasure called for a recognition of God's primary role as the Author of our needs and our wants." He says, "According to the Talmud [an ancient text containing Jewish sayings, ideas and stories], it is forbidden to enjoy anything of this world without saying a blessing.

"For this reason," Fr. Cameron says, "the Jewish people composed blessings, called *berakoth*, for every imaginable occasion: upon seeing lightning, upon seeing the ocean, upon seeing a rainbow, upon hearing good news, upon hearing bad news, during illness or recovery, when tired or dispirited, upon wearing a new garment, before a journey, when granted an escape from danger, etc."

And so that is one thing you see throughout the movie *Shtisel*, in what we come to recognize in viewing it as a very natural occurrence in the strictly Orthodox Jewish way of life. Fr. Cameron, in relating this to our Christian way of life, says, "Because we trust in how much God loves us, we want him to be part of every dimension of our lives, even the most difficult and burdensome."

In one very significant example of these Jewish prayers, each time a religious Jew goes into their, or another's, home they touch a *mezuzah* in a 5" decorative case which is affixed to the doorframe of the home, pointing inward, then kiss the fingers that touched it.

And that may remind you of a Catholic tradition of having a holy water font at the inside front door of our homes, where we blessed ourselves coming and going. I

don't know how many still follow it now, but some still do – including at our home. And we still do it here at our spiritual home, as we enter and as we leave the Church – remembering the waters of our Baptism as we make the Sign of the Cross.

So, the *mezuzah* is a piece of parchment called a *klaf* inside a decorative case that is placed at an angle on the doorframe. And this is the important part: On the parchment are Hebrew verses from the *Torah* – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. And the verses are the same ones that we heard today in the First Reading from Deuteronomy and in Mark's Gospel, with minor variation. The prayer is called the *Shema*. "*Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*"

Observant Jews consider the *Shema* to be the most important part of the prayer service in Judaism, and it is traditional for Jews to say the *Shema* as their last words before dying, and for parents to teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night. So, as important as it is to the Jewish faith – though we as Catholics don't put the same dedicated emphasis on it in our daily life – I think we do give it the same overall importance in our own lives naturally as we live and proclaim our faith. But, still, it's a good reminder for us, and something to get us back on track sometimes.

There's also a significant difference that we hear from the Jewish version of the *Shema* and the First Reading, from Jesus speaking the *Shema* in today's Gospel. Jesus is asked by a scribe, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" And after Jesus replies with the *Shema* as being the first of all commandments, he adds more to his response to the scribe saying, "The second is this: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" And Jesus ends with, "There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe responded to Jesus affirming all that Jesus had said, to which Jesus replied, because of the scribe's understanding, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

What would we give to hear those words spoken to us by Jesus? Those words are in our heart every day we live by Jesus' words. "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*"

The last line of today's Gospel from Mark is one of my favorites in all the Gospels. It says, "And no one dared to ask him any more questions." Why not? Why were there no more questions to be asked? Because Jesus gave them all they needed to know about living their lives fully. And us? Would we ask one more question? It sometimes seems we want to add the word "but" to what we hear: "But what about this...?" "But what if I can't do that...?"

The dictionary says that the word "but" is a coordinating conjunction used to connect ideas that contrast. Why would we want to hear those words of Jesus – any words of Jesus – and then add the word "but" to what our Lord just said?

Why would we want to express any hesitation of our love of God – or, of our neighbor – with an additional condition for that love on our part? It certainly isn't there on God's part for any of us.

*"The Lord our God is Lord alone." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* We're generally good, for the most part, on the first commandment about loving God – hopefully. On the second, we sometimes might be a bit reluctant. Bishop Robert Barron, in a commentary on Mark's Gospel, in his *"Word on Fire Bible,"* says this about loving God and our neighbor.

He says, "There is a strict logic at work here. When you really love someone, you tend to love, as well, what they love. Well, what does God love? He loves everything and everyone that he has made." Bishop Barron writes, "So, if you want to love God, and you find this move difficult because God seems so distant, love everyone you come across for the sake of God."

Easy? No. Still, Bishop Barron's words might be something worth thinking about for a while – a long while.

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*"Hear, O People of Mary, Queen of Peace! The Lord our God is Lord alone! We shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength."*

And ... *"We shall love our neighbor as ourselves."*

