We are delighted to gather together and warmly welcome you and the brothers and sisters joining us online. When an artist is painting or sculpting, they often pause to look at their unfinished work or canvas, appreciating and contemplating what they are creating.

A Jewish rabbi once said that our lives are like works of art; we must pause regularly to reflect on the world we want to create and the kind of people we can become in this world. This is the purpose of the Sabbath.

This moment is our time to pause and reflect, to consider what we are shaping in the other six days of the week. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, let us enter this moment together.

**Prayer:** Lord God, as we look to the countless saints who have listened to and obeyed Your call, following in Christ’s footsteps and bearing witness to a beautiful faith, we ask You to help us open our hearts. May we listen to Your will and commandments, learn from the example of the saints, and be inspired to follow Christ with passion.

**Putting first thing first**

**優先順位**

Mark 12: 38-44 11/3/2024

All Saints’ Day is a Christian holiday, much like Christmas, that has become commercialized and secularized over time, losing its original meaning. Traditionally, this day is a time to commemorate the saints, learn from them, and pay tribute to their lives.

The concept of saints is found in both the Old and New Testaments:

In the Old Testament, "saints" refer to people who are good, merciful, and holy, often mentioned in the Psalms and the Prophets. For example, in Psalm 31:23, "Love the Lord, all his faithful people! The Lord preserves those who are true to him, but the proud he repays in full." Here, the psalmist calls the people of Israel "the holy people" who praise the Lord.

In the New Testament, the term "saints" appears nearly 60 times. In Romans, it says Christians are "called to be saints." Saints include those who have lived devout lives, those respected by the community, and even those who have "fallen asleep" in Jesus. Revelation describes Jesus as the King of the saints, and the white robes worn by the bride of the Lamb symbolize the saints. It also speaks of the army of Satan surrounding the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire descends from heaven to destroy them.

In the face of commercialization and secularization, we must not forget the true meaning of All Saints’ Day in the biblical tradition. On this day, we remind ourselves to honor the saints from generations past, along with those saints we hold dear in our hearts. We encourage ourselves and our fellow believers to be sincere friends of Jesus, making Christ the center of our lives.

May each of us strive in the direction of sanctification, envy and pursue becoming a saint. Let the Holy Spirit transform us, open our hearts, and live a rich life full of love in this world.

Today, as we read from the Gospel of Mark, we reflect on our priorities. Have we placed the first and most important matters first? It is easy for us to overlook what truly takes precedence.

When the scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the greatest?" it may sound like a simple question on the surface. But the scribe was really asking, "Out of the 613 commandments in the Torah, which one is the first?"

Jesus responded from within His Jewish tradition, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel." The first word is "hear"—*Shema* (from the Hebrew verb meaning “to hear” or “listen”). Since the second century BCE, this phrase has been a repeated prayer for Jewish people.

*Shema* is at the heart of Jewish faith. When asked, "Which commandment is the first?" the first word of Jesus’ answer was *Shema*—"hear." Which commandment? "Hear, O Israel." Before Jesus spoke of loving God and loving our neighbor, He put hearing first. Listening is even more fundamental than love—hearing comes first.

"Hear, O Israel." This is a theology centered on the ear, rather than on the written word. Emphasizing hearing reflects a commitment to moral commandments and a life of faithful devotion. "Hear, O Israel."

Paul says, "Faith comes from hearing" (Romans 10:17). In John 3:8, we read, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going."

Elizabeth said to Mary, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:41).

God speaks to us through Jesus Christ, and may we respond like the prophet Samuel, saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!" (1 Samuel 3). Listening is the first step toward love. Listening is part of the first commandment; it implies receptiveness and a humble attitude. Listening is a form of receiving. If we don’t use our ears, we fail to prioritize what is most important.

If we don’t listen first, we lack the ability to love fully. Without listening, we struggle to accept Jesus’ call. It is through listening, not through our own feelings or thoughts. Without listening, it becomes difficult to love. A lack of attentive listening may also reflect a lack of love, or at least a struggle to love. If we don’t listen, how can we know what or how to love? Listening poorly can lead us to love imperfectly.

"What is the first commandment?" "The first is: Hear, O Israel."

We must first listen: The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. Listening to God precedes the command to love. Putting God first is the prerequisite for love. God is the source that connects all things, including love itself. God is love. Some may think it’s possible to love without God, but when we ignore the very source of our actions, sometimes our actions lack the spirit of love, reducing what we do to emptiness.

In a culture that emphasizes individualism, listening to the Lord our God and putting "God first" is a significant challenge. Jesus calls us to avoid a self-centered, "me-first" mentality and to put God above all. Only by listening to God can we fulfill the greatest commandment to "love," truly understanding what love and the meaning of life are.

Putting God first is the path to making love the highest priority. God is love; love unites us with God and with others. By listening to the Lord our God first, we understand whom to love and how to love. Love flows from God, and we love because He first loved us. Paul says, “...so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the strength to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:17-18).

Listening to God comes first, followed by acts of love. “Which commandment is the most important of all?” The first commandment is to love: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second commandment says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these. The scribe asked for one commandment, but Jesus gave him two—one from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus—because, for Jesus, these two cannot be separated.

Gospel songwriter V. Michael McKay captures this unity in his song, showing that loving God and loving our neighbor is truly one commandment.

How can I say that I love the Lord
Whom I’ve never ever seen before?
And forget to say that I love the one
Whom I walk beside each and every day?

How can I look upon Your face

And ignore God's love? You I must embrace!

You're my brother, you're my sister,

And I love you with the love of my Lord.

Loving God is expressed in loving our neighbor. It’s the same love. The Christian life cannot exist without love. People know we are Christians by our love—not by our hate or judgment. Mark wants us to understand what comes first. Saint Augustine said, “If anyone thinks they understand the Scriptures but does not build up this twofold love of God and neighbor, they have not understood it at all.” The rule of Christian life is the rule of love. How do we measure a Christian life? By the length, breadth, depth, and height of our love.

Loving God is the compass of our whole being—our heart, soul, mind, and strength. “Love is wonderful. It is holy, demanding our spirit, our life, our all.” This love is both vertical and horizontal because love is the cross; it touches heaven and earth.

Mother Teresa said, “It’s not about how much we do, but how much love we put into what we do.” Christ gave His whole life for love. The saints of the Church, including Saint Mark, knew that love is the crown upon our heads. It is something we strive to grow into throughout our lives, reaching high enough to wear that crown. We continue in love, following Jesus, being like Jesus.

We repeatedly put the first commandment first, striving to keep it “in every conversation with our children, every item we buy, every dish we wash, every piece of recycling, every song we sing, every meeting we attend, every message we write, every meal we eat, every service we join—in every facet of our lives, expressing God’s love, practicing God’s first commandment” (Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm).

We should remember that when Jesus quoted Deuteronomy, saying “Hear, O Israel,” the people of Israel were still in the wilderness. *Shema*—in the wilderness—called them to hear and to love God. We, too, are called to love God in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness.

When we are sorrowful, we sing; when our joints ache, we dance; when our hearts break, we laugh. Like our Savior, we love, even in the face of death. When you don’t feel like loving, love anyway. This is a commandment. Love is a choice, not a feeling; no matter what happens or what is demanded, choose love.

“You shall love.” The well-known American author, pastor, and theologian Frederick Buechner sees this not just as a command but as a promise: *You shall love.* Even if we are struggling now, ultimately, we will love God. For in the end, we are told of “a feast of love with the best foods and wine. There will be no more death, no tears, no mourning, no crying, and no pain. Everything will be a new creation of love, and you shall love.” Each day, that ultimate promise should be our first priority—not just on All Saints’ Day.

The true blessing of the Kingdom of God is that we continue to stand against a world of violence. That is the calling of heavenly saints, a calling we pray to live out today. It is a feast, not a famine. It is life, not death. It is love, not hatred. The final promise becomes our eternal priority at the wedding feast of the Lord our God, where what is first is also the last, the Alpha and Omega of love. May we hear what Saint Mark teaches us today, to put what is most important first. May God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.