

The debt of love

There are many respectable translations of the Scriptures used at Mass. I am using for the basis of my reflection on today's second reading, the English translation in front of me (the Jerusalem Bible version) which puts Paul's opening words very aptly. The apostle says "Avoid getting into debt".

Paul was skilled in playing around with words to get his message across. He wrote those words two thousand years ago. But you could think he wrote them in our credit card age. We hear countless tales of luckless folk who buy this and buy that, so many articles that seem to them necessary or that strike their fancy, all on their credit card. The mountain of debt builds up. There is however a final day of reckoning. In some tragic cases it ends up with the loss of their home.

You may or may not be likely to build up a mountain of debt. If you are not, you may feel these opening words do not apply to you so much. However, everyone of us needs to heed the message that Paul has in the second half of the sentence. "Avoid getting into debt, *except the debt of mutual love*".

The Apostle reminds us that the very heart of truly Christian conduct is love. He gives a listing of some of the key commandments that we must observe. We must not kill, we must not steal, we must not commit adultery. By using such striking examples, Paul is getting his message across in a dramatic way.

The Christian life is not one of avoiding this misdeed or that misdeed, be they significant misdeeds or seemingly trivial. The Christian life is not basically one of do's and don'ts. It is one of acting out of love.

So many of us were brought up in an era when the commandments seemed all important. Not just the Ten Commandments. But also the so many does and don't that the Church preached. Not that these were unimportant or readily to be violated. But the spirit in them must be the spirit of love.

Today's Gospel tells us how, if necessary, we are to reprove a wrong doer. First of all quietly, one to one. If this is unsuccessful, then with the support of one or other brother or sister. Only in the extreme case is the community to condemn the wrong doer. But always it must be done in love.

Paul would surely want us to end our reflection on what he has written by centering on the words with which today's passage concludes. "Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour. That is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments".

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