

Reflection for the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Why are we here? Can you imagine hearing this question at the start of a homily on Sunday morning at a 7:00 AM Mass. I could imagine a variety of reactions, such as a husband turning to his wife and whispering to her, “if the priest does not know why he is here, then why are we here?” Others could react by thinking, “poor Father he is just overworked.” I am sure that I have just scratched the surface on the different ways that people at a 7:00 AM Mass on a Sunday morning would react to this question. I am sure that those who attend the anticipatory Masses on Saturday and the other Masses on Sunday would have a similar response to this question being asked at Mass. I would also think that a good number of people would hear this question and respond with a profound answer, recognizing the importance and significance of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

After reading our Sunday Readings for the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, I found myself asking the question, “why are we here?” I found myself asking this question primarily because of the Scribe in our Gospel Reading this Sunday asking Jesus, “*which is the first of all the commandments?*” In our Gospel Reading this Sunday taken from the Gospel of Mark, we hear at the start of the reading that one of the scribes came forward to Jesus and asked Him a question about which is the greatest commandment. If we look at the verses before our Reading this Sunday taken from the Gospel of Mark. We hear of Jesus having a discussion with some Sadducees, about if there is a resurrection of the dead or not. In the two final verses of this discussion that Jesus has with some Sadducees, we hear Jesus say to them, “*As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God told him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not God of the dead but of the living. You are greatly misled.*” These two verses are 26 and 27 from chapter 12 of the Gospel of Mark. It is Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees found in these two verses that prompted the Scribe in our Gospel Reading today to ask Jesus, “which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus responds by providing the two greatest commandments, to love the Lord our God completely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Scribe is impressed with the complete answer that Jesus gives him and expresses his admiration to all who would hear him. Jesus for his part says to the Scribe, “*you are not far from the kingdom of God.*”

We can look at what the Scribe asks Jesus and see at face value that he is just asking what the greatest commandment is. But in chapter 12 of the Gospel of Mark before the Scribe asks Jesus his question, Jesus is speaking with the Sadducees about the possibility of Heaven. In Mark 12:28a, right before the Scribe asks Jesus his question, we are informed that he heard the conversation that Jesus had with the Sadducees, and this is what prompted him to ask his question. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke we hear that the Scribe asks his question to Jesus to test Him. I would also suggest that he asked his question to Jesus because he was looking for an answer to another question, and that question is, “why are we here?”

I recently googled the question “why are we here” the answer I got from google was, “*there are multiple possible answers to the question of why we are here.*” Google went on to list four answers which are as follows:

1. Evolution, some say that the purpose of life is to continue to evolve, learn, adapt, and grow. This includes striving to be a little better each day.
2. Relationship with God, according to the Judeo-Christian worldview, God created humans to have a relationship with Him and with each other. Some believe that God created humans to love Him and each other, and to reflect His image in how they care for the world.
3. Self-improvement, some believe that the purpose of life is to grow and flourish, and that challenges are meant to push us beyond our comfort zone.

4. Enjoy the world, some say that the purpose of life is to enjoy that world around us, and to live with those we love.

I will have to admit that I was impressed with the four answers that google provided to the question, “why are we here?” I did not expect the answers that google provided would be as complete as these answers are. But in the end, I would have to say that all these answers fall short when comparing them to the answer that Jesus provides the Scribe in our Gospel Reading this Sunday, “*The first is this, Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” The scribe was able to find a more complete answer to the question, “why are we here,” by focusing on God and asking a question that is God centric. The Scribe in our Gospel Reading this Sunday, through his question provides us with the two greatest commandments that answer the question, “why are we here,” but also provides us with the template of how to seek answers to our questions. As we continue our journey in this world striving to grow in wisdom and understanding, may we follow the example of the Scribe and keep our search for wisdom and understanding, God centric.