

## Homily for Trinity XX - 25 October 2020 - The Two Great Commandments

William Barclay says that Our Lord's summary of the Law as given in today's short gospel reading in answer to a question asked by a Pharisee is... and I quote... "The complete definition of religion."

Discussion and argumentation over the precise nature and the extent of the Law was a way of life in the various religious schools of thought in Judea in the time of our Lord. It would be impossible in a short homily to even touch on the many differing approaches that there were to interpretation of the number of laws and their extent. The various approaches can, however be broadly reduced to two general approaches. One was an approach that continuously expanded the law into hundreds and even thousands of rules and regulations. The other was a tendency that tried to gather up the law into one sentence or general statement which would be a compendium of the entire message.

Amongst those who attempted to 'gather up' the content on the law into a paragraph, a sentence, or even a phrase, the following are worth a mention.

1. The great Jewish sage Hillel, who was born in Babylon approx 100BC and died in Jerusalem approx 10AD, (He was the grandfather of Gemaliel, the sage who had taught St Paul the law when Paul was pharisee). Hillel, famously summarised the Jewish law by saying... "*what you would hate done to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary!*"

2. One hundred years or so earlier one of the great High Priests of the temple, Simon the Righteous, had said: "*The world depends on three things: the Law, Worship and Loving Kindness.*"

3. In the Psalms, King David reduces the precepts of the law to 11 in Psalm 15. I won't list them now, you could easily look them up for yourself at home.

4. Isaiah in Ch 33: 15 speaks of 6 fundamental precepts. You could look them up too, for that matter.

5. The prophet Micah famously reduced the number to 3 in his well known statement: '*What does the Lord require of thee? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.*' Micah 6:8.

What Jesus has done in his answer to the question '*what commandment in the Law is greatest?*' is to quote from two books of the Law. Firstly He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5... "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.*" and then He quotes from Leviticus 19:18... "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*"

Our Lord's answer to the question is familiar to all of us, I'm sure, but its important to note that Jesus broke broke new ground by quoting those two well known portions of the Books of the Law, as already noted, and joining them together as one. The first commandment is love God.... the

second is love your neighbour and he concludes by stating that the whole law and the prophecy depend on these two.

So far so good? Love God and love your neighbour. The two go together, they are inextricably joined together. 'You can't have one without the other', to quote the song 'Love and Marriage' from 1955, made famous by Frank Sinatra, then at the peak of his popularity. We cannot hive off the love of God from love of neighbour and imagine for one moment that things spiritual and purely religious are the really important things to the exclusion of all else. On the other hand, neither can we pretend that we can simply doers of good works and forget all about God and His glory either. The two go together, they are, as said, inextricably bound up together. And there is a very good reason why that is the case.

The crux of coming to terms with Our Lord's teaching to love both God and neighbour lies in coming to a mature understanding of the word 'love'. What does it mean to 'love' God and what does it mean to 'love' our neighbour?

Our society uses the word love in all sorts of mostly unhelpful ways. Think of these common uses of the word. 'I love a nice red wine.' 'I'm in love with you.' 'I love it when you smile like that.' 'Let's make love.' The word has become so hackneyed in our language by its overuse in ways that are, very often, utterly trivial. The love of God and love of neighbour that is spoken of by our Lord is not trivial, it is not emotional, it is has very little, if anything, to do with warm feelings of delight or passion.

If we move along to our use of the word 'love' in terms of our love for family and our love for our close friends etc., this use of the term is often not really so helpful either when it comes to understanding love for God and love for neighbour as, all too often, familial love is still mainly a description of emotive feelings.

If we would love God, it is necessary that we find a love which is well beyond emotions; a love which directs our thoughts (and especially our logical and clear thinking); and it is necessary that our love of God be a love which is the dynamic of all our actions. Love of God is a love which requires a total commitment of our lives. It is the love of which St Paul speaks so eloquently in 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8. You know it well I'm sure. Just to summarise though, it is called sacrificial love. The love that is patient, kind, never boastful, never dishonours others, seeks nothing for itself, keeps no record of wrong doing, takes no delight in evil, rejoices in the truth. It is the love that always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres.

Sacrificial love is a love so powerful that God comes first and my own feelings, longings and preferences are readily put aside in order that my love for God may be real and have a meaning that goes far beyond sentiment, feelings and emotions. This love – sacrificial love – is the love that readily submits to the beloved. Loving God with my whole heart, whole soul and whole mind

means that before anything else I must be wanting to please God by doing what God wants. My desires, longings and ambitions are laid aside so that I can please God by doing what He wants, not what I want.

A very big part of showing our love for God consists in doing what God wants and that will be expressed in love for my neighbour. Our love for God MUST issue in love for our fellow men. Note carefully though and note well the order in which the commandments come in our Lord's teaching.

We are to love God first and love mankind second but the two cannot be separated. There is a very good reason for this: It is only when we love God that man becomes lovable because someone who loves God knows that man is created in God's image and likeness. THIS is the reason why man is lovable. Remove that fact and sooner or later we will become angry and dispirited about the state of mankind, rather than hopeful and even optimistic. Without God's vision of man we would soon see man as unteachable, unable to be improved and finally unable to be helped. The loss of God's vision for mankind eventually results in all sorts of arbitrary divisions of man into two groups - the good and the bad.

As well, someone who loves God will be very much aware that God has given clear help and guidance in how we should go about loving God and loving man. That help and guidance is found in the Scriptures and principally in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. Its worth reminding ourselves that loving God means living a life of obedience to God's will and faithful following of Jesus Christ who himself confirmed every one of the Ten Commandments in his teaching ministry. Without love of God as the primary source of the ordering of my life, I am left with no clear set of precepts and principles upon which to build a genuinely loving and moral life. I would have no moral compass, if you like, and would soon be led astray into self indulgence disguised as goodness. Without love of God to guide me, I can choose what seems best at the time. Without love of the Scriptures and respect for the revealed truths contained therein, it is impossible to even know the mind of God for a start, so how can I possibly love someone whom I know not?

One other important aspect of our Lord's command to love God and love neighbour must be mentioned. It is that my neighbour is anyone who I come across who is in need. In ancient Israel their long tradition of the exclusiveness of God's chosen people led to a two tier approach to humanity. There were God's chosen people and then there was everyone else who did not really matter. Our Lord clearly rejected that notion repeatedly and he did so with the greatest clarity in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of that well known story being that the people who used their religion to differentiate between God's chosen and all the rest were wrong. The Samaritan, a

non-person if you like, was the one who obeyed God and showed sacrificial love to his neighbour – the injured man lying in the dust. Everybody is my neighbour.

“The complete definition of religion.” To be truly religious is to love God, as He is revealed in the Scriptures, and to love mankind whom God made in His image. That love of God and Man has nothing to do with a nebulous sentimentality, rather it requires a wholehearted, courageous and sincere commitment along with a humble obedience to God’s commandments for life. Such a love will find its issue in true devotion to God and in practical service of men.

Now unto Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power at work in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, both now and for ever Amen.