

### Sermon Ordinary Sunday 30 Year A 2023

Many of you would remember from times past rattling off the Ten Commandments at the start of Holy Communion. As an alternative you could rattle off, '*You shall love the Lord your God...*' etc. Except, not the version we have heard today from the Gospel but instead from Mark who adds 'strength', something not present in the Leviticus text Matthew is more careful to quote accurately. It was placed at the start of the service to remind us of our sins and failings as we prepare to come into the presence of the Holy. Both *Love the Lord your God with all you heart, soul mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself* and the Ten Commandments served as a useful benchmark to see where we had fallen short, and where we need God's grace to do its work. But as with any overused liturgical text, it can lose its power. We say the words but don't allow them to speak to us in any meaningful way. Still, the words remain familiar and important. So, it's good to revisit them.

Last week the gospel described the Pharisees with the Herodians seeking a way to trip Jesus up. In the text today it is the Pharisees with the Sadducees. *Master, which is the greatest commandment...?* And, we see Jesus once more avoid the trap and answer them by saying love of God and love of neighbour are the two fundamental dimensions not only of the law but also of the prophets. Jesus' opponents are expecting him to make a radical departure from the law. (If he does, then they have the excuse they are looking for to do away with him). But Jesus' response shows that there is essential *continuity* between the law of the old covenant and the kingdom he proclaims.

We have been seeing of late the gospel writer Matthew playing with different ideas around relationship: the church's relationship with Israel, the relationship with civic authority. And now the relationship between these two commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbour. We might see it as an exploration of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our faith. The vertical which directs us to God. The horizontal which directs us to the world around us. In Jesus, we see this balance perfectly realised. And it is perhaps why the Cross is such a potent and powerful symbol: it balances these two directions – the vertical and horizontal – perfectly.

But some of the tensions that are experienced in the life of the church have their root in an unbalanced way of interpreting the relation between these two commandments. Some people emphasize the love of God in a way that makes the relationship with neighbour appear secondary (or even accidental!) in the life of faith. The imperative to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger - as we hear in the first reading from the book of Exodus today - is overlooked or given lip service.

On the other hand, there are others who argue that being Christian is really just about commitment to the poor and marginalized and vulnerable. There is a lot of appeal in this. When the media speaks of the church most favourably it is when we get this part right. Which is not to say we all have to become bleeding-heart progressives! All too often - when the balance is tipped in this direction - Jesus all too easily becomes some sort of social justice advocate, and not the Son of God. Or a new age hippy environmentalist, and not the Way, the Truth and the Life. Without a doubt, engagement with the real and gritty issues of the world is important for believers. But we run the risk that prayer, worship, study of God's word, other spiritual disciplines, and commitment to the community of faith, can also be overlooked or given lip service.

This is why if we keep just one of these 'loves' - if we focus on just love of God or love of neighbour - if place our emphasis on just one direction, *we lose both*. People who imagine they serve God while having no interest in the good of their 'neighbour' will not find the God of the Bible and their worship will ring hollow. And true love of neighbour is one that leads to praise and adoration of the one true God.

But we have to be a little careful here. We can very easily imagine what love of neighbour might be, of all that it entails. We imagine that love of neighbour is simply a practical and generous care of the poor and vulnerable. A correct sense of what is right and just - indeed what constitutes 'love' - can become seriously, (in fact, dangerously) misguided. We have seen this play out over the past two weeks. We have seen certain parts of our society side with evil. We have seen certain parts of our political class, the media and the universities in particular supporting terrorists, as if they were on the side of justice and truth! To justify this diabolical alliance, they have had to deal in deceit and half-truths. But it begs the question, if a cause for mercy, compassion, and justice requires such an alignment, then it is surely time to rethink the paradigm which motivates it! The Charter of Hamas, and the blood-curdling horrors unleashed on October 7, simply reveal the moral corruption of those institutions and individuals who support them. And far from displaying love of neighbour, there is a parody of love!

Now, this is surely an extreme situation. But it reveals a real problem. We can easily be misled by what we think a loving response to neighbour looks like. One of the more common issues is that we can outsource this love. We might say it is something Anglicare looks after, or the Salvation Army (or the UN!), or whatever charity or organisation we care to name. 'They do it much better than we could ever do. They have the expertise and the resources. They are much better equipped to look after it all.' Love of neighbour can very, very easily become tokenistic. But remember, even if love of God has priority – as Our Lord says, is the 'greatest commandment' - there is a sense of equality between the two commandments. Yes, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. But the second *resembles it, or is like it*. They are to be expressed in equal measure. It is not so much about giving stuff and doing stuff but of how we see the world; how we regard our brothers and sisters.

But even in this, we can overlook the full weight of what true love of neighbour involves. Yes, it does have practical consequence - as the Exodus reading highlights. But before we answer, *who is my neighbour?* we need to ask, *what is love?* Love of God shows itself in true worship and faithful obedience. Love of neighbour – in the words of Thomas Aquinas – is 'desiring the good of the other.' Love of neighbour, then, is not just providing food, shelter and clothing, justice and care, as important as these are. Before his retirement, Benedict XVI very helpfully reminded us that the greatest love that can be shown to our neighbour - the greatest exercise of charity - is to share the gospel. That is true care. That is true mercy. That is true love. Because it recognises that our neighbour is not simply a material (or political) being, but a person with an eternal destiny. The most profound way that we can show love of neighbour is to introduce them to the Truth, to share the good news. It is this *ultimate* perspective that will bring into harmony the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our faith.

This has been one of the greatest failings of the church in modern times. We now live in the aftermath of this disaster: the failure of the church, to take the gospel and its power seriously. It has led to an unhelpful exaggeration of the horizontal direction of our faith, an obsession with the cares, concerns and values of the world. But the two commandments are meant to be held alongside each other. To love God we must first know him. This means the greatest act of love involves presenting the uncompromising brilliance of Truth. It means a radical rethinking of what love looks like. If our love of God is to be real then our love of each other needs to be real. True love means leading to the Truth. Amen.