

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 31 Year B 2021

In the account of the Last Supper in Luke's Gospel, our Lord says to his disciples, 'How I have desired to eat this Passover with you.' In some translations, this verse reads, 'I have earnestly (or fervently) desired to eat this Passover with you.' And others, 'with all my heart I have longed....' Well, to borrow the words of Our Lord let me say, how earnestly/fervently/with all my heart have *I* desired to eat this meal, this sacred banquet, with *you*. After three months separated from each other, celebrating mass here on Sundays with a sea of empty pews before me, with literally only a handful of people, looking down a camera, you seeing me, but I never seeing you, what a joy and blessing it is, then, to welcome you back here, to welcome you back home. And let us pray that we will be able to continue to gather, that the enforced division of our congregation will soon cease, that those who remain hesitant and nervous about returning will be filled with a spirit of confidence and peace in being able to return. Because if one part of the body is missing, then the whole body suffers. So, welcome back! It is good to have you here! And let us step forward, now, in faith, hope and love.

In times of stress and crisis – and these past 18 months have certainly been that for all of us – it is important to work out (and pretty quickly!) what is important to us. When everything is thrown up in the air, when everything is questioned and disrupted, when there is so much uncertainty, we need to fix ourselves upon a sure anchor. It has certainly been one of blessings of the past year and half that many people have been able to work out for themselves and their families what truly matters. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to reexamine priorities, to judge what is truly essential, to recalibrate our lives to better accommodate those things which count.

In moments of stress and crises, it does not help to hang on to those habits and patterns of behavior which drain us of our energy and distract us from what truly nurtures and gives us life. As we stagger to some sort of normality (yet again) let us, as people of faith, be on our guard. We know what we can lose. We know the pain of losing it. In the mad rush to Christmas, we will, all of us, now be urged *to forget* our good lessons! We will be urged to resume our place as consumers, the secular version of the 'greatest commandment', the 'one thing that matters.' So, let us treasure what we do have. Let us be sure we know what God of his good grace has entrusted us with and allowed us to share. And let us not be shy in earnestly defending the immeasurable treasure, the pearl of price, we have been blessed to share in.

By divine gift, the gospel reading placed before us today, once more reminds us of the essential. When all else is stripped away from us, or when countless voices and demands are clamoring for our attention, the twin commands – love of God and love of neighbour – should help reorient our lives. If we are looking for an anchor when the storms of life churn about us, then it is surely this: love of God, love of neighbor.

Now, what is presented in the gospel for us today is a sort of ‘summary of the law’. Such summaries are not uncommon in the practice of various religious traditions. They are a means of distilling the essentials of a faith so that the whole of the faith can be easily understood. We have just recited one ourselves in the Creed. And such summaries were common in the rabbinical tradition around the time of Our Lord. The Ten Commandments themselves are a summary of the 613 laws contained in the five books of Moses. And the summary we hear today – love of God and love of neighbour – were frequently seen, including in the rabbinic tradition, as itself a summary of the Ten Commandments. Love of God, relating to the first three commandments. Love of neighbour, relating to the rest.

Now, the scribe mentioned in the gospel appears quite genuine in the question he poses to Our Lord. At the end of the passage, we get a sense that there is a sincere striving for truth. But importantly, while the scribe asks only for the first of all the commandments, Jesus gives him the second as well. So Jesus’ summary of the whole of the law, then, connects the ‘vertical’ and spiritual aspects of faithful believing with the ‘horizontal’ and social. Christian faith can neither be reduced to a social action movement, nor can it be restricted to the merely religious.

It is surely no accident that Jesus places ‘love of God’ first and ‘love of neighbour’ second. At the back of our mind might be echoing the sentiment in the first letter of John: *we cannot claim to love God whom we cannot see if we do not love our neighbour whom we can see*. But human nature being what it is, sullied by sin and selfishness, we actually *cannot* love our neighbour unless we first love God and attend to the pattern of life to which God calls us. In other words, if love of neighbour is our priority, then pretty soon we will miss the mark. Invert the priority, and we can end up with not much more than an activist or utopian approach to faith, or merely a work-based religion.

It is frequently the case that the obvious things are those which need restating. And this is surely the case here: love of God is to be the priority of our lives. Now, the practice of examining the self to see how true this really is for us is worth embarking upon. If a complete outsider were to observe us from a distance, noticing our habits, and our interactions and conversations, how we order our day, the time allocated to each task, would a conclusion be made that God is the centre of our lives? Now, the question is *not* whether an outsider could discern a Christian or not. If an outside observer could not see whether we were Christian or not well, then, we are in trouble!!

It is a difficult question, and I do not propose it to make any of you uncomfortable (though perhaps church leaders spend far too much time and energy avoiding difficult topics, and taking the path of least offence...). But the truth is, most of us go through life without taking opportunity for such examinations. Rarely do we afford ourselves the important task of assessing where we are now, and where we hope to go. But this is the consequence of what Our Lord proposes today. If love of God truly is first in our lives, truly is the priority, then it will show! There can be no hiding it! It will shape our time and leisure, our conduct with family and friends and work colleagues. How we spend our money. It will shape our ethical and moral lives, our private lives.

If love of God were truly lived as the first commandment, then perhaps faithful believers would have pushed against so many of the privations we have experienced these months. Our status in the wider culture at least has placed Christian gatherings as just one 'nonessential' service alongside all other 'nonessential' services. After 18 months of this, we now face the grave situation where many Christians have bought into that narrative, that the church actually isn't that important, that we can actually manage without meeting in person, and that in fact it's probably better or safer if we didn't. But this just a symptom that God has been displaced from his throne...

During the bleakest days of World War II, Winston Churchill's famously argued, "Never let a good crisis go to waste". They are words we could apply to ourselves. Our Lord today gives us a critical tool to help us not miss the opportunity now given us. While we might feel the push that true faith is most clearly expressed in love of neighbour, we might well remember that the most loving thing we can do is in fact bring our neighbour to love of God. Love of God and love of neighbor is not simply a convenient summary or slogan. It helps us see what truly matters, to cut through the guff and to order priorities. And so help us to understand the whole of our faith. Amen.