

Sunday 25th October 2020: last after Trinity

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-40

'Teacher – which commandment in the law is the greatest?'

What of all the commands do we most need to hear and put into practice?

The question put to Jesus came from a Pharisee lawyer in the context of gathering opposition and a troubled world. We are told it was to test him, but questions about the commandments were constantly debated among the religious leaders. In the code he was referring to there were 613 commandments to choose from. A little over a third were positive – you must, you should, and 365 negative – you must not, you should not. Jesus began with the traditionally accepted rabbinic summary of the law from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:5): 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.' This was deeply ingrained in the teaching of their religion and could be described as creed, recited as the *sh'ma* prayer twice daily. But then Jesus added 'and love your neighbour as yourselves', from the Book of Leviticus. The entirety of what God required was summed up in these two interdependent commands. It did not diminish the law but was the foundation on which everything else stood and shifted the focus from arguing specifics of rules to what underpins faithful living - 'love God, love your neighbour'.

In recent months in our troubled world, we have been reminded that we are living in times when autonomy is prized, but we are required to abide by rules that affect our freedom and choices, for the good of all; where there is an ever increasing range of ways of communicating, but a paradoxical level of loneliness and isolation; voices crying out to be noticed, but divisions and inequalities causing many to be forgotten. We see and hear things, here and in the wider world, and want to believe that love will overcome hate, but question where the evidence for that is. In the context of our world, we might ask the same question: which commandment is the greatest; what do we most need to hear and put into practice? The answer is the same as it was when it was put to Jesus and has been throughout history. 'Love God, love your neighbour'.

But what does this mean in practice? Most translations of the Deuteronomy text have it as love with 'heart soul and strength', but Jesus spoke of 'mind'. Perhaps we should not get caught up in determining the exact translation, but maybe this was deliberate. Jesus was talking to a teacher of the law, someone who had devoted his mind to developing knowledge and ability to debate. It was as if Jesus was saying to this enquirer: 'bring all that you are, every aspect of your personality, everything that you are passionate about: use it to love him'. Loving God in this way does not happen by accident, it is intentional, and it demands to be worked out in practice. It does not answer all the religious and ethical questions in our lives, we must still wrestle with these, but it does give us a guide to determining our choices and our actions as we seek to practise this command.

I remember one time in a Bible study group, someone said the problem was they could love God, but found it difficult at times to love themselves - so loving their neighbour as themselves didn't make sense. Another thought loving yourself sounded selfish and was confused because she had always been taught to put others first. So perhaps we might hear the words slightly differently: love God and love your neighbour as you, yourself are loved by him. Loving God with all that we are, is a response to the love of God for us and as God's love abides in us, grows in us, it will lead us to reflect and show his love to others. The two parts of the command cannot be separated, but we

begin by knowing ourselves to be loved, unconditionally, with all our strengths and weaknesses, without limit, and then seek to show that kind of love in the way we live our lives.

There is perhaps a temptation to think loving our neighbour in practice means *doing* things for them. After all, Jesus spoke of showing our love for him by how we behave towards others: 'when I was sick you visited me, clothed me, fed me.... for as much as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me'. So for some it will be in using the skills and intellect we have, or the physical strength and abilities, in choices of work and calling to a particular way of life. We might not be called into such dramatic and life-changing way as Paul was when he followed the command. But he began by loving God with all his heart, knew God's unconditional love and therefore, as he told the Thessalonians, 'cared about them so deeply that he was determined to share with them not only the gospel of God but also our own selves'. Instead, for us it may be that we show our love for God by doing something to make a difference in our own communities and in the lives of those we come into contact with. Or perhaps it is by transformative effort that brings about change for some of the bigger problems and issues we see in our world. All of these are ways of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

We are thankful for all who use their gifts in this way. But it does not always have to be action of that kind and no-one is exempt from ways of living out this command. In one session of a Diocesan conference a few years ago Sam Wells (of St Martins-in-the-Fields), encouraged us to reflect on the shape of the ministry of Jesus, which we might take as our pattern for our faithful living. He suggested that only 1% of the ministry of Jesus was about 'working for' – doing things for people; 9% was 'working with' others and 90% - 90% - was about 'being with': building relationships of friendship or compassion, walking alongside others in times of difficulty, suffering, pain, trouble. I don't know how he reached these percentages, but the point is there is also a way of loving our neighbour by 'being with', walking alongside, them. This is probably much less visible, and can be more challenging, because we may not be able to solve the problems of others, or *do* anything, or even be physically present with them. Paul could not be physically present all the time among those he shared the gospel with, but he was with them, walked with them, nonetheless. He did it by writing countless letters, only some of which we have as examples, to encourage and support, and he prayed constantly for them. Or it could be like the friend I met with earlier this week whose heart for social justice led her to become a befriender to asylum-seekers. She has never met the person she has befriended, but walks alongside them in their long struggle for a safe place to live, by weekly phone calls. Or the many hundreds of phone calls made and messages sent, notes sent, flowers left on doorsteps, by people in this church, giving assurance - you are not forgotten as together we walk these difficult times. These too are all ways of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

What of all the commands do we most need to hear and put into practice now, in our time? Love God, love your neighbour as yourself: continue growing in your love for him and let God show you the way he wants you to live his love for others.

Ruth Goatly