

Sermon 25 October 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 Matthew 22:34-36

In the opening verses of our Gospel reading we have one of the most important and crucial passages of the Bible. *Read* Why do I say this? Because this passage underpins everything Jesus stood for, everything he taught, everything he did. These two commandments have their origins in the Old Testament, and I don't mean as part of the Ten Commandments, though in a sense they are. Confused? I will come back to that in a moment. It is a common misconception that 'to love your neighbour' is one of the Ten Commandments.

So let's go back to the Old Testament in order to understand where these two commandments came from. Firstly, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6:5. That verse was part of the Shema, the basic and essential creed of Judaism, the sentence which every Jewish service opens with, and the first text which every Jewish child commits to memory. It means that we are called to love God unreservedly; that it must be our first priority.

Secondly, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Interestingly, this commandment is often ascribed to Jesus himself, but it is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, which we heard in our reading. However, Jesus did one thing with this verse. In its original context it has to do only with fellow Jews. It would not have included Gentiles, whom it was quite permissible to hate. So Jesus took an old law and filled it with a new meaning.

There is one thing Jesus did which was new, and that was to put these two commandments together. No Rabbi had ever done that before. Look where they come from – one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus. It is really interesting that Jesus associates the caring of others with the loving of God. We have talked about that before in the context of Francis of Assisi.

I said before that these two commandments are not strictly speaking part of the Ten Commandments but in a sense they are. They are in that Jesus, when he says, 'All the other commandments are based on these two commandments', is saying that these two commandments sum up the Ten Commandments. If you look at the Ten Commandments, generally speaking the first 4 are about loving God, and the remaining 6 are about loving others....generally speaking. But neither in itself is one of the ten.

I want to focus on the fact that Jesus associated the loving of others with the loving of God; the fact that he presents these two commandments not separately but together; that they go hand in hand. It is important that the ritual of worship does not take place of love. We have made the point before that it is of no use if we come to church every Sunday and worship God enthusiastically if that worship is not reflected in how we live our lives Monday to Saturday.

I am sure you are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Two points I want to refer to. Firstly, the parable is in answer to a question posed by an expert in religious law, 'What must I do to receive eternal life?' Jesus answers him with a question of his own (the Socratic method), 'What does the law of Moses say?' The scribe answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus responds by saying, 'You are correct.'

But the scribe then asked a further question, 'Who is my neighbour?' And that is when Jesus, without further ado, related the story of the Good Samaritan.

I am not going to go into any detail on that parable right now, but I just want to highlight one interesting aspect in relation to the point Jesus makes that the worship of God and the love of others should go hand in hand. As we know a man lies wounded on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, having been beaten and robbed. The first two men who come across him and pass him by are a Jewish priest and a Temple assistant. Why did they do that? Because their focus was on getting to the Temple and conducting worship. They didn't want any distractions, they didn't want any delays. Let someone else take care of the man – their priority was to worship God!

I remind you of the story I told about the devout lady who every day walked to her church in order to worship God. Every day she passed by beggars and hungry children in the streets, but she never gave them any attention such was her focus on getting to church. Then one day, she arrives to find the doors locked and a notice pinned to the door, which said, 'I am not here. I am out there.' It probably wasn't but that story could well have been inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan.

What comes first, the chicken or the egg? It doesn't matter. The point is that the worship of God and the caring of others are inextricably entwined. You can't have one without the other. That's the point Jesus is making when he combines these two commandments together.