

PENTECOST 21A 25-10-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; *Matthew 22:34-46*

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.*

*'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'*

*He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."*

*This is the greatest and first commandment.*

*And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'*

*Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:*

*'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?'* They said to him, *'The son of David.'*

*He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,*

*"The Lord said to my Lord,*

*'Sit at my right hand,*

*until I put your enemies under your feet' "*

*If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?'*

*No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

Today's gospel reading is about- surprise, surprise – love. Preachers these days are always banging on about love: and I find myself wondering sometimes if people get a bit tired of it and would rather hear about something different, like celebrity gossip or weight-loss: but you can find those in any trashy magazine. Or what about climate change or law and order (pronounced 'Laura Norder' of course...), or American politics: but you can hear all that on the news.

I suppose the reason we talk about love so much is because Jesus did, and he stressed the importance of love in all his teaching. On this occasion he was answering yet another challenge from the religious authorities who were checking out his credentials. One of the lawyers set him a test, asking him which commandment in the law is greatest.

The answer Jesus gave was entirely orthodox, and would be instantly recognised by any Jewish person, then or now. The first commandment: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" comes from Deuteronomy chapter 6. This is in a sermon given by Moses to the people of Israel about the Ten Commandments.

It is the basis of the Shema, the prayer every observant Jewish person prays twice daily: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God..." and so on.

The second commandment, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself", comes from Leviticus chapter 19. It comes from a list of ethical commandments which expands on the basic ten, and the whole verse reads: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord."

Jesus stressed that not only are these the greatest commandments, but if you get these right then everything else will fall into place. All the other laws and commandments depend upon love of God and neighbour.

We may well ask: how can you command someone to love? Isn't that a bit like telling me I must feel happy, or angry, just because you say so? How can you command a feeling?

You can't, so we need to recognise that this love is not a feeling or an emotion but loyalty of action toward God and neighbour. It is about how I act, the decisions I make and the attitudes I have. Loving feelings may follow, but my love for God and my neighbour does not depend on my changeable emotions. I don't have to feel warm and fuzzy about you to love you: I don't even have to like you.

When I worked as a hospital chaplain I needed to learn to suspend judgement and to act in love towards each person I encountered. When I worked in Karnet Prison Farm that person may have been a sex offender, a drug dealer, or worse.

Chaplains are particularly aware of the responsibility to love unconditionally because it's their work and ministry; but all of us who want to follow Jesus need to take love seriously. When we make the decision to love and when we pray, the Holy Spirit helps us and gives us the ability to love, to overcome dislike or prejudice or judgementalism.

The Holy Spirit helps us to face and overcome fear: fear of those who are different, fear of being judged ourselves, or fear of others taking advantage of us.

This is a good example of how prayer works. If you have someone in your life who is causing you grief: someone you have to work with, perhaps, or a family member, or even a fellow parishioner, then try praying for them. If you make the decision to pray regularly for their wellbeing, asking God to help you to love them, you will find your feelings towards them changing over time. Prayer changes us. The person you are praying for may be just as irritating or thoughtless or whatever, but your attitude to them will change once you have decided to love them.

Loving your neighbour as yourself assumes that you do love yourself, but this isn't about whether your self-esteem is intact or not. It is about the basic care we give to ourselves: we eat, sleep, keep warm (or cool) and try to provide ourselves with all we need to live. Love of neighbour means we want the same for other people as we want for ourselves.

This will affect our decision-making. If I want people in developing countries to earn a fair income, as I do, I choose to buy goods from ethical companies that don't exploit their workers, or fair-trade companies. If I want children to grow up in safety and freedom, as mine did, I may choose to argue with those who put child asylum seekers in detention centres.

This kind of ethical decision making, based on love of God and of neighbour, will involve the way we shop, or vote, and where we give our money. If it is love that motivates us, we will want to give to agencies and missions that provide for our neighbours the things we expect for ourselves, like clean drinking water or education or health care.

Let us also remember what Jesus told the Pharisees, when he asked them whose son is the Messiah. He who answered their question with the two love-commands is not merely a teacher; he is more than a descendent of David; this is the Lord, the Son of God, commanding us to love and keep on loving.

Giving to the church is part of our expression of love. Our giving is not like a payment for services or for goods: we give because we love God and God wants us to give, so that we can support the work of the church in the world. The Church brings the Good News of love to all, and we need to hear it and to tell it. May our gratitude to the God who loves us encourage us to love and to give in response.

The Lord be with you.