

Ruth 1:1 - 18**Psalm 146****Hebrews 9:11 - 14****Mark 12:38-44****The greatest commandment**

There was an Anglican priest who advised his curate how to go about his future ministry: “Preach broadly on love and don’t say too much about sin”. In the yearly round of preaching on the Lectionary it is impossible to avoid preaching on love. Each year the three-year cycle includes the section on the great commandment. The Scribe in Mark may have been on a quest to find out more about love. But it more likely arose from a longstanding interest in being able to capture the essence of the law in a sentence. The scribe’s question in Mark comes from a section in which Jesus is in Jerusalem and clashing with the religious leaders. His prowess at answering their charges prompted the question: “What Commandment is first of all?” Jesus replied, using the words of Deuteronomy 6:4 *Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* This was core belief. Devout Jews recited these words every morning and evening. And yet Jesus adds “with all your mind” to the original wording. Like the Scribe we would have been pleased with his answer, not least because we value the intellect. How we would like to see our church pay more attention to rigorous intellectual effort in matters of faith, life and governance in our church. But we must also see that Jesus’ inclusion of the intellect does not give it priority. The mind is placed alongside heart and soul and strength. Jesus’ embrace of the mind does not make way for a purely intellectual faith. What we offer to God through our minds is meant to be part of worshipping and serving with our whole being.

Jesus went a step further and added a second commandment, taken from Leviticus (19:18) *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* These words were part of a code of justice, which spelled out the implications faith in God has for our relationships with one another. *You shall love your neighbour as yourself* sits in the middle of a text which, implies that to love God includes refusing to exploit your neighbour. On top of the idea that living under the sovereignty of God demands our whole being (including intellectual assent) Jesus now says there must be love for others which translates into just relationships for all.

What Jesus has done is taken two pieces of the tradition, expanded one and joined it to another. In doing this he has defined living in honour of God as wholehearted, and as binding us to live together in a positive and equitable way. He has taught that there is no valid honouring of God which, results in unjust relationships, nor does it result in the demeaning of the self. Furthermore the operative verb in both of the commands, love, is stated in the imperative. What is at stake is more than an intellectual notion. To look to God above, as Moses does, is meant to make a difference to the world. It makes an imperative of embodied action towards others. It leads to incarnational living: something happens in the world as a result.

The Scribe, whose business was the Law, recognized the significance of what Jesus had said: "This is much more than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." The validity of ritual and worship is not denied or made redundant, but it is placed in context. The imperative of love towards God and neighbour, rules over all. This means "God" is integrated with all aspects of life, and it also means "I" am not the centre.

The love of self mentioned here is problematic. Modern psychology continues a line of interpretation that stretches back to Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas which says there are 3 objects of love: God, self and neighbour. Many see modern culture as in love with itself alone, with no room for God or neighbour. That really explains what sin is in the modern world. Modern self-indulgence makes it hard to imagine promoting more forms of self-love. On the other hand we know from experience that where self-esteem has been badly damaged, the task is to help people reclaim love for the self in a healthy way, rather than surrender it further. Protestant theology since Calvin declares that God does not command the love of self. What we can say is that faith in God above gives birth to a relationship of justice with my neighbour that is also measured by what I myself will tolerate being done towards me. What will I accept? What do I have time for? What will I make excuses for? Whose welfare will I deeply desire? In this way the love of self can be present as a measure of what is due to others, but not as a focus for self-indulgence.

The Commandment to love is so routine for us that we wonder how we can say and hear these things again. But in fact what Jesus has done is brought some fresh words to a traditional environment. And these words were inextricably linked with his deeds. By what he said, and then by what he did, he expressed fully the reality of the commandments he taught. It was his own self-giving love, fully expressed on the Cross, which opened up a new way of faith and life with God, surpassing that offered by burnt offerings and sacrifices.

In the 1930s when Dietrich Bonhoeffer was formulating his views on the Church and the world, and was beginning to oppose the Nazi regime he said the church was not identical with any particular form, national, denominational or social. The church was Christ existing as community, and could be found wherever people lived together in the solidarity of love for God and neighbour. Bonhoeffer was concerned with credible Christian praxis. He said faith was no opium that left Christians content in an unjust world. It was "precisely because we look to what is above we protest all the more stubbornly and deliberately on this earth." "The church" said Bonhoeffer, "is only the church when it exists for others" - that is, when it does not exist for self-serving purposes.

We know what it meant for Bonhoeffer to live out his commitment to these thoughts. He did not live to see that many church leaders felt no guilt over concentration camps, euthanasia programs and genocide. It seems incredible to us, but when our time has come, how will we rate? Will we have said and done enough about the plight of indigenous people in Australia? Will we have let the government get away with the false idea that Nuclear Power is a clean, green, option? Will we have spoken out about the atrocities being committed against our own and others in Guantanamo Bay? Will we have protested about policies that steadily create a larger under-class and an ever-enriched monied elite? Will we have shown enough concern about affordable housing and psychological and social services for the mentally distressed? Will we dare to go

where the suffering of our neighbour leads us? And as the government starts making promises to fund chaplaincies in schools, will our readiness to take the funds blind us to the potential for manipulation, bias and power play in the gift?

Jesus did not speak broadly about love, he spoke specifically about it, and he lived it. He demonstrated that if God is truly in the equation there is no escaping the call of the neighbour. From this we can begin to understand what sin is. Sin is to become centred on the self in such a way that it separates us from Spirit of God and tears us away from love of our neighbour. To live in sin is to no longer care about what happens to others in the world. To sin is to no longer protest when society (including the church) lives by pride, the worship of power, covers its actions with weasel words, and promotes humbug instead of real justice. Jesus gave his whole being in protest against such as this, because he saw that this is where the love of God leads. The question is, where is our life focussed? And how much does the choice we have made mean to us?