

Sermon

We have before us today, another question put to Jesus by the Pharisees. In our gospel readings over the last few weeks the temple scribes and Pharisees have been engaging Jesus in a toxic verbal debate during what would be the last week of Jesus' life. In our gospel reading today, we hear what is to be the last time these leaders take Jesus on in a verbal battle. Today Jesus wins the debate when he is asked about the greatest commandment.

The command to love - the summary of the law, has become a mini creed for Christians. The lawyer today comes to Jesus asking which of the commandments of the law was the greatest. To us, Jesus' response comes as no surprise. We hear it so often that we become impervious to its impact. We smile comfortably as it washes over us like nice massage oil or a good cup of tea. But to that lawyer that day, Jesus' words came as an astounding shock. He identified two commandments - the love of God *and* the love of neighbour as among the "great" ones. The first of these commandments were familiar to every Jew. It stems from the *Shema* - which is the supreme confession of faith in the Jewish liturgy. And it states, "Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The astounding part for the lawyer is that Jesus raises the command to love one's neighbour as oneself to the same level as the love of God. This was a new idea. Up until then, love of God was primary, while love of neighbour was a lesser command. But now, Jesus claims that these *two* commandments summarise the whole will of God as revealed in scripture. As Jesus often did in his teaching, he cancelled some parts of the Law of Moses left some things unchanged, while in some cases he sets an entirely new standard. Today, Jesus says that love of neighbour "*is like*" the love of God - in other words, love of neighbour is on a par with love of God - he sets a new standard.

Well you might say, "so what"! What's the big deal about this change? Is the vicar making a mountain out of a molehill? Of course, the first command was nothing new to the lawyer. Jesus simply quotes the supreme confession of faith in the Jewish liturgy. And so yes, the most important thing in our life is our love for God and everything else logically flows from it.

But if our understanding of Jesus' answer only goes this far, then we have only begun to plumb the depths of Jesus' comment that the second command "*is like*" the first. Jesus did not simply mean that the command to love our neighbour as ourselves is the proof of our love of God. Neither did he say that the command to love one another "is similar to" our love of God. What he told us was that

the commands to love God and to love our neighbour are seamless and inseparable. He was saying that there is no love of God that is not at the same time the love of one's self and one's neighbour. This was what astounded the lawyer. He thought that being a good religious person meant attending worship, saying his prayers and offering everything in his life to God - and as long as he was doing that, then he was 'ticking all the boxes' and fulfilling his obligations in loving God. But here, Jesus raises the stakes, because now Jesus says to the lawyer that love of neighbour requires the same level of priority as love of God. That required a radical mind shift. And I can see why. It is easy for churchy people to fall into the same trap - going to church, attending lots of prayer meetings, and studying their bibles - but unless that translates into compassion and justice in our relationships, it's all meaningless. I am reminded of the story of a person who clearly loved God a great deal, and was a very keen evangelist, who spent a lot of time trying to convince a neighbour over the fence to become a Christian. Eventually he plucked up courage and went across and gave the neighbour a bible saying, "Read that and you will be convinced of the love of God." The neighbour simply threw the bible away, and said, "I've already read it - I've watched the way you live your life." Our love of God, and the way we treat others are two sides of the same coin.

Jesus is telling us three things today. First, we must love God. Second we must love our neighbour, and third, we must love ourselves. How do we love God? I offer you a metaphor: Imagine you are in a concert hall, and there is a single singer whose beautiful voice fills the hall. Everyone is transfixed by the beauty and power of the singer's voice, and it is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. The singer's voice is in undisputed possession of the crowded hall - and everyone is attentive and tuned in to the voice. So it is with us and God. If God is the singer, God holds undisputed sway over our hearts, we stay attentive to God in our life of prayer so that nothing else is allowed to weaken our attitude of 'yes' and 'thanks' to God.

How do we love our neighbour? Loving our neighbour begins with high standards of listening and communication. It means being attentive to others; it means speaking with clarity and care, showing honour and deep respect in the way we speak and listen. This is always easier said than done, but how can we even begin to understand our neighbour if we are not at least attentive to their story and willing to understand what makes them tick? Loving our neighbour does not mean we have to like each other. The church is not a club of like minded people. We are called together by God; it is God who calls us, gathers us together, and who makes us his people. The awful reality presented to the lawyer that he was going to have to get along in an active way with the people he disliked a great deal; outcasts, sinners, those he had practiced so hard to avoid! And so it is to be with us. The

gospel calls us to show the love of God in all that we do, even those we don't like. Martin Luther once said that our lives may be the only bible that people read. Give loving your neighbour, especially those you struggle to like, the same priority as your love of God.

If the gospel means anything to us, we need to love ourselves. Loving ourselves starts with being comfortable with the truth of who we are. It means carrying within ourselves awareness that we are utterly loved by God. It means being able to see our own goodness and gifts, the ability to laugh at ourselves, to look after our own needs and our own growth. It means being able to accept affirmation from others, being open with our thoughts and feelings and opinions, and expecting to be taken seriously by others.

The gospel enables us to be a community where those qualities are nurtured in all of us. We are called to be a community who know what it is to be loved by God. We are a school for learning how to love our neighbour and we are called to show the world what that looks like by the way we treat one another here. We are called to ourselves and to allow our hearts to be channels of God's unconditional love. If we can grasp this simple truth then our church will be bulging with people every Sunday.