

Sermon - Love God and others

Based on Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18, and Matthew 22.34-46 (NRSV)

Reminder of last week

- Last week's Gospel reading focused on groups of Pharisees and Sadducees having a go at Jesus, setting him riddles to try to catch him out so that they could then denounce his authority.
- I suggested that those riddles were riddles of relationship, and that Jesus didn't go along with their dysfunctional understanding of relationships - especially the relationship between us and God.
- In my sermon I referred to part of today's Gospel reading, where Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6.5: '*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*'
- I used this to describe where Jesus was coming from in his attitude and teaching about relationships: that he was highlighting the need for us firstly to attend to our faith relationship with God, and to ensure that this is the primary one by which we then orientate all our other relationships.
- Because if we truly render to God what is God's, firstly, it then becomes apparent how and what might metaphorically belong to Caesar, or to the state, or to the community - and it would enable us to have the appropriate attitude in how we relate to these other aspects of our social living.
- This can be stated simply as: firstly get your relationship with God right, and then you will be able to get all your other relationships right.

The next riddle

- This is what I highlighted last week - and now we come to that passage I referenced.
- In the same way that groups of those opposed to Jesus tried to trick him in last week's Gospel, so they make another attempt in today's Gospel.
- They ask: '*which commandment in the law is the greatest?*' (Matt 22.)
- And Jesus answers simply, in effect: Love God, and love others.
- I'm going to unpack the first part of this teaching later on in this sermon.
- Before I do so, I want to address some other aspects of the Gospel reading.

An ancient foundation

- The first is that it is helpful to realise that while Jesus sometimes gave new or deeper teachings in his ministry, quite often he merely referred people back to the ancient teachings, and effectively said: this still applies - just do it.
- And this is the case with the two commandments that he describes as being fundamental to all other commandments.
- Fundamental means foundational - the very bottom-most part of a construction, that everything else is built on.
- As I have already indicated, the 'love God' commandment is Jesus merely quoting Deuteronomy 6.5.
- And the 'love others' commandment is Jesus quoting from today's Old Testament reading from Leviticus 19.18: '*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*'.

The two and the ten

- You might perhaps be wondering - what about the ten commandments, how do they fit in with these two?
- The simple answer is that the first four of the ten effectively provide some detail about loving God: regard God as the only God; don't turn anything into an idol; don't abuse God's name; spend time (e.g. the Sabbath) on your relationship with God.
- And the last six effectively provide some detail about loving others: honour your caregivers, and don't murder, cheat, steal, lie or deprive others.

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- In the same way, every other directive given in the Bible can be understood to be part of the detail of one or both of the two fundamental commandments.

The riddle of David's lord

- The other aspect of the Gospel reading concerns the second half of it.
- Before this, Jesus had been set some riddles by those opposed to him, and now it is his turn to set them a riddle.
- First, he asks them who is supposed to be the ancestor of the Messiah, and they answer by saying that David is the ancestor - that the Messiah is the son of David - that is, the descendant of David.
- He then quotes Psalm 110, verse 1:
*The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet'*
- They all understand this psalm to have been written by King David about the Messiah, who they agree is David's descendant.
- Now everybody regarded David as the greatest king of the kingdom of Israel, and that it was unthinkable to suggest that a descendant of David's could be greater than David.
- So Jesus points out to them that David himself, in writing Psalm 110, was effectively referring to his descendant - the Messiah - as lord of David himself.
- That is, David is implying that the Messiah is greater than David himself.
- So Jesus quotes David to challenge their own misunderstanding about the Messiah.
- Jesus, the 'son of David', was showing them that his own authority as the Messiah exceeded that of the revered King David, and that David himself had acknowledged this.
- And when he asks them to explain this, they have no answer.
- Ultimately their only answer is to have the Messiah crucified.
- They are so determined not to face up to the truth that they try to kill the truth.
- How ironic and how sad, that when they are reminded of the ancient teaching about loving God and loving each other - which they as religious leaders are supposed to be teaching by example and instruction - that all they can do is try to save face by killing the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Loving others is not about niceness ...

- I am now going to return to the two great commandments: loving God, and loving others.
- Our first and final hymns today speak directly into the 'loving others' commandment.
- And it is the one that people find the most accessible, and think is the easiest to do.
- Although sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that being a good citizen is close enough, or that being nice to people is how we love them.
- As we heard in last week's Gospel, the Pharisees were nice to Jesus, and praised him very nicely.
- But their heart attitude towards him was anything but nice: their niceness was actually deceitful, and was a cover for their malice.
- So focusing on being nice is not what loving others is all about.

... but about kindness

- A really useful word here is kindness.
- Because we all understand that kindness is a genuine attitude of the heart, wanting what might be best for another.

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- Refusing a child yet another helping of icecream might not be nice for the child, but we understand it to be kind, because it is looking out for the child's best interests.
- So being kind to someone is about being focused on what they need, rather than what they want.
- Admittedly we can sometimes make the mistake of presuming what another person needs - particularly an adult who might not have some advantage that we might have, such as an education, or a home, or regular income - and we make the mistake of not actually consulting them about what they need.
- But even when we don't always get it right, striving to act kindly towards every person we encounter is the basis of loving others.
- And it can even be as simple as actually acknowledging them: greeting them with a smile.

Loving God ...

- Nevertheless, it is the commandment to love God that can be the most challenging to engage with.
- Quite simply: how does one love God?
- Often we might avoid this by focusing on loving others - and that is certainly part of it: as Jesus said, the two commandments of loving God and loving others go hand in hand.
- But even people who aren't Christians can love others well.
- Being a Christian - a disciple or follower of Christ - is more than just about loving others: Jesus himself says so here.
- We need to engage with the idea of loving God - and intentionally enact this.
- Over the years I have found it really helpful to compare my relationship with God to my relationship with my wife and children - and vice-versa.
- On reflection, I find that these relationships inform each other.

... is like loving those closest to us

- The way that I feel about my sons has helped me understand in part how God feels about me.
- And the way that I would like them to respond to me, helps me understand how God might want me to respond to him.
- The way that my wife and I value, and rely on, and support each other, mirrors in a small way how God wants to engage with me: valuing, supporting and even relying on me, and inviting me - wanting me - to value him, support him, and rely on him in return.
- What a pleasure - what an expression of love - it is for me when one of my sons calls me, and says "Hi Dad. How're you going? I just want to catch up with you."
- And then tells me what he's doing, and been learning and thinking about, and maybe asks for advice.
- And wants me to do the same in return.
- And this is what God wants us to do as well - to call him up, as it were, and intentionally spend time with him, in worship, and prayer, listening to his word in the Bible and sermons and elsewhere, and telling him about what we're doing, and thinking about, and learning, and ask him for advice.
- What a pleasure it is for me when one of my sons tells me about something he learnt from me - or from my wife - and how that has helped and blessed him.
- Or even how he might have taken that counsel further, and wants to share that back with me, for my own enjoyment and blessing.
- This kind of relational intimacy that we might have with those closest to us is exactly what God desires for us to have with him.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

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- One final challenging aspect might be that we find it difficult to comprehend our ineffable God in a way that we can personally engage with.
- Ineffable means indescribable, beyond words.
- How wonderful, then, that he has given us his Son Jesus.
- Because we can at least engage with God *through* Jesus Christ his Son.
- As Jesus said: '*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*' (John 14.9)
- And so we can express our love, and worship, and prayers to Jesus himself.
- And receive the same from him.

As the deer pants for the water

- As a way of concluding this sermon, we will now sing our next hymn, which enables us to express this love for God:

1. As the deer pants for the water,
so my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*
2. I want you more than gold or silver,
only you can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
and the apple of my eye.
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*
3. You're my friend and you are my brother,
even though you are a king.
I love you more than any other,
so much more than anything.
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
to you alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
and I long to worship you.*

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