

Sermon - our primary focus

Based on the readings: Deuteronomy 6.1-9; Psalm 119.1-8; Mark 12.13-17, 28-34

Our primary focus

- Before turning to the Gospel passage, it is helpful to look at the reading from Deuteronomy, in which Moses expounds upon God's law as he understands it to be.
- He does this before the Israelites cross the Jordan and start to re-establish themselves in the land their forebears had claimed.
- Moses says that the primary focus of God's people should be God.
- It is God who has rescued them from slavery, who has shown them his way, has provided for them, and will bless them where they are to settle.
- And in saying that '*The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*' (Deuteronomy 6.4), Moses is emphasising that there is no one else and no-thing else, that should compete with, or replace, our primary focus on God.
- To '*love God*' is to be in an active faith relationship with God that takes priority in every aspect of our lives: in our hearts, in our souls, in our physical strength.
- This is not about being pious or religious or not being able to get on with living and enjoying life.
- Rather, it is about how we are aligned in our motivations, in our thoughts, in our actions and interactions.
- When we are aligned with God as our primary objective, then everything that we think or do or say will be rightwise.
- When we try to do the right thing according to some other priority - according to our own or someone else's desire, or according to priorities like wealth, or status, or respectability - then it stands every chance of not being rightwise, perhaps of being plain foolish.

Keeping focused

- Moses continues:
Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. (Deuteronomy 6.6)
- That is, we need to actively remember them.
- How can we actively remember them?
- Moses tells us how:
*Recite them to your children ...
talk about them when you are at home ...
[talk about them] when you are away,
[talk about them] when you lie down ...
[talk about them] when you rise.
Bind them as a sign on your hand,
fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ...
write them on the doorposts of your house ...
[write them] on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6.7-9)*
- Moses provides a simple list of ways to surround ourselves with reminders that our love of God is our priority - the priority of all God's people.
- We are to teach it to those in our care, and to talk about it with others - those at home, and those elsewhere.
- We are to remind ourselves of our love of God when we awake, and when we prepare for sleep.
- We are to set physical reminders of our love of God on our bodies, and have them constantly before us, and at those points of transition in the places we live in.

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- Since our late brother in Christ, Clive, is currently in my thoughts, his example of this is appropriate here - in that on his living room wall was a modern crucifix, and on a chain round his neck was a cross.
- These were some of his constant reminders of his faith in God.

- Today's psalm passage is the first section from Psalm 119.
- Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm, with 176 verses, in twenty-two sections of eight verses each.
- Throughout the whole psalm there is an ongoing reminder of the need to turn to God's law, and the benefit of doing so.
- If the Psalms had been written before Moses gave practical advice on how to actively remember our love of God, he might very well have added: recite a section from Psalm 119 every day.
- Not as a legalistic requirement, but as a helpful suggestion - to aid us as we give priority to God in all things.

Gospel context

- As we turn now to the Gospel reading, I'm going to remind you of its context in the overall narrative of Mark's Gospel account, then reflect on the first part when Jesus refers to the Roman coin, and finally touch on Jesus' engagement with Moses' instruction from Deuteronomy.
- Over the previous Sundays we have heard of Jesus reaching his farthest point from Jerusalem as he walked through the region.
- When the disciples finally acknowledge him to be God's Anointed One, the Messiah, he then starts travelling back to Jerusalem, focusing on teaching them about Christ-like leadership.
- Last Sunday we heard of his final stop before Jerusalem, when he enables yet another disciple, blind Bartimaeus, to see how to follow in his Way.
- The part that we have effectively skipped over between last Sunday's Gospel passage, and today's, is Jesus making his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and from then on preaching and debating at the temple every day until he celebrates the Last Supper with his disciples.
- So today's reading describes two of these interactions that he has with some of the groups of religious leaders that are starting to get really irritated with his teaching, because it shows them up as not being as right-wise as they regard themselves to be.

Trick question - wise answer

- The first interaction shows Jesus getting out of a deadly trap they set for him, which then points to the affirmation given in the second interaction.
- The two representative groups pretend to complement Jesus with their insincerity, claiming that Jesus defers to no-one, but God alone.
- They then ask: *'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'* (Mark 12.14)
- The trick in this yes/no question is that either answer will land him in trouble.
- The Roman poll tax was resented as it was a constant reminder to the Jews of their subjugation by the Gentile Romans.
- If Jesus answered 'Yes', he would have lost the support of the people - which was the one thing protecting him from his enemies, the religious leaders.
- If he answered 'No', then he would have been reported to the Roman governor with a charge of sedition, likely leading to his execution.
- Instead Jesus points to a deeper truth.
- All coinage was deemed to be the property of the leader depicted on it.

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- Jesus' answer, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,' (Mark 12.17) highlights the need for discernment.
- Too often people want simple black and white answers, and they force this binary limitation on others, to exercise control over people and situations that are not, or should not be, controllable.
- What does need to be controlled are our own responses and interactions, through self-control.
- And this requires discernment.
- Jesus let's us know that we need to exercise discernment about our responses to civil law, about how we cooperate with the secular government, and how we carry out our civic obligations.
- And how is our discernment guided?
- What prioritises how best to respond, how best to cooperate, and how best to meet our civic obligations?
- Jesus makes it clear: that we recognise God, and our faith relationship with God, as our primary focus.
- When we are then in right alignment with God, then we will make the right response when it comes to our part in civil society.

- As an aside, I think that Jesus teaches us something else here, as well.
- That is, when faced with a questioner who insists on either Yes or No as a response, then, if you suspect your questioner is motivated by malevolence, you can refuse to play by those rules
- Even if you don't have the wisdom of Jesus in that moment, you are not obliged to comply with a questioner's rules if you haven't agreed to them.

The greatest commandments

- In the second part of the Gospel reading, another religious leader engaged with Jesus, but this time it appears that this was a genuine test of Jesus' comprehension of the law.
'Which commandment is the first of all?' (Mark 12.29)
- Jesus responds by quoting from today's reading from Deuteronomy, about prioritising our faith relationship with God.
- As a consequence of having this priority, Jesus highlights another commandment, from Leviticus 19.18:
You shall love your neighbour as yourself.
- Sometimes we assume that Jesus was introducing something new in his teaching, but he was radical rather than revolutionary.
- By radical, I mean that he was returning to the root, or source, of the Jewish faith.
- The word radical is derived from the Latin *radix*, for root.
- So in giving these two great commands, Jesus quotes what was already known, directly from the law of Moses.
- When the scribe agrees with Jesus, Jesus in turn affirms the scribe's agreement, saying to him: *'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'* (Mark 12.34)
- Jesus reminds us all that the kingdom of God is about giving priority to God, and to our faith relationship with God.

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For our own reflection

- Last night, by happenstance, I stumbled upon a couple of quotes from some well known Christians that make the same point of Moses, and of Jesus, but from the perspective of their own personal experience.
- St Augustine of Hippo, who lived around 400 AD, wrote about his life before he became a Christian:
“But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth - not in him, but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion and error.”
- This is, of course, a negative, in that it describes the consequence for Augustine of *not* prioritising God.
- And Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who was sent to a German concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home during the Second World War, wrote:
“I have held many things in my hands and have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.”
- Thinking about Augustine: do you look for pleasure, beauty, and truth firstly in God?
- Thinking about Corrie: what do you place in God’s hands?
- Thinking about Moses: how do you actively remind yourself to give priority to God in all you think, say and do?
- Thinking about Jesus: do you give to God the things that are God’s?
- Because when you *‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ (Mark 12.17)*, then the kingdom of God draws near.