

22nd Sunday after Pentecost 2023. Matthew 22:34-40: The heart of the matter.

Today Matthew reading follows directly on from last week's gospel, where the Pharisees tried to test and trick Jesus about paying taxes, and the Sadducees (who don't believe in the resurrection) tried to trick him about the resurrection.

Today's reading opens with, "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?'" (vv. 34-36).

So he answers the lawyer (or scribe) just the way he answered the Pharisees and Sadducees – with a pure and piercing truth that goes straight to the heart of living the Christian life.

So when we hear these words from Jesus about love, he is speaking into the heart of what it means for us to be his followers. He makes the claim that all of the 613 commands in the Old Testament Law are fulfilled by two: love God with everything you are and have and love your neighbour as yourself.

But Jesus teaches a certain quality to love, that is quite different from the notion that our culture has of love. It's important for us to understand what that quality of love is that Jesus is speaking of if we are to grow as disciples of Christ Jesus.

There are some things we should consider concerning this love.

Firstly, love, as a Christian, should be outwardly focused. Jesus begins by telling the teacher of the law that love is firstly and always outwardly directed toward our Father God who created us and loves us, not inwardly directed.

Jesus responds to the question from the religious lawyer and his friends by quoting back to them the first part of the *Shema*, which is recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4, something that every pious Jew would recite every day of their lives, and we say every service of Holy Communion before the confession. We could say, 'Hear O Church, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.'

And what is at the heart of this great proclamation about God out of which springs love? That God is *our* God, the one God; we are brothers and sisters together living in a relationship with the Almighty, the Creator of the Universe, the one God deserving of worship and praise. And everything else springs from that wonderful fact.

And so love comes from this great truth, this life-giving experience we are called into, and love must be outward to draw others to seek this experience. This is the truth that we are called to proclaim through word and deed, caring for those who are sick, helping those in need,

rejoicing with those who rejoice, mourning with those who mourn. This is how Christ is shared without necessarily talking much.

Secondly, we see from this passage that Christian love is also demanding. Jesus continues in verse 37, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Now this is a very important verse for us for two reasons.

Firstly, and this may seem an odd thing to say, but it is extremely rare to read in the New Testament about our love for God. What we read about, often, is God's love for us. So, because it is rare for the New Testament writers to mention our love for God when they do, we ought to sit up and listen and recognise the importance of the statement.

But secondly, I think there is something going on here between Jesus and the Scribe, a teacher of the law, and a thoughtful and intelligent person. He asks Jesus, which is the first commandment and, keeping true to the tradition of the both of them, Jesus replies with the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4.

But Jesus does something here. The *Shema* in Deuteronomy says: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *strength*." But when Jesus recites the *Shema* to the Pharisee, he says: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your *mind*."

Jesus includes our minds when speaking to the pharisee who has devoted his life to enquiry about God, devoted his whole mind to this task, if you will.

Jesus is saying bring everything into your love for God; everything you are, every aspect of your personality, all your work, all your passion, all your learning – everything that God has made you to be; use it all to love him.

And that's the demanding nature, I think, of Christian love - that God wants all of us, not just a part, holding nothing back. This is the opposite of just coming to church on a Sunday or watching a service online.

When I was a teenager, I asked a very wise minister, 'is it OK to be a Christian and still love watching James Bond?' To my astonishment he answered 'what, do you think Jesus wouldn't want to watch James Bond with you?'

It was a truly excellent (and Jewish) answer. Don't consider that anything could be outside of loving God. If there is something in our life that we can't include God in, then we are holding part of ourselves back from God. Does that make sense?

Like God's love for us, our love for God consumes us. It is demanding of us, but each day is full of the new mercies of God, and each day we too give our lives afresh to God in Jesus Christ, in obedience to the first and greatest commandment.

Thirdly this great love we are called to is unconditional towards others. In verse 39, Jesus goes on to say, "You shall love your neighbour..." Here, Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18. This love for our neighbour is not the same feeling of love that is felt in the heart in the same way it is felt for our husbands or wives, families, or even friends.

It is an act of the will, not the heart.

The command to love our neighbour means to love those who are antagonistic towards us, or who even hate us and that is, by far, the hardest thing to do. But that too is demanded of us if we wish to follow Jesus. It cost Jesus, the son of man, absolutely everything and we are being constantly changed to be like him.

Finally, as +Cam said a few weeks ago, Christian love is self-accepting, for want of a better word. In some of my conversation with people, the lack of self-acceptance is the core of their unhappiness, even despair. For some people, the hardest thing to hear is that God loves you. Personally, just the way you are. You can't change to make him love you any more than he does.

This is so important. Bring this feeling to God and know you are fully accepted by the creator of the universe and also of you. You are accepted and loved exactly the way you are. Don't wait until you've sorted your life out so God will then love you. He loves you now, he loves you at your very worst. God sees each and every one of us as beautiful, and lovely, and lovable.

Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God...Love your neighbour as yourself."

On these hang all things.

Love is the very definition of the Christian faith. It is the heartbeat of what it means for us to follow Jesus. A love that is outwardly focussed. A love that is demanding. A love that is inclusive of all people. A love that is self-accepting... Let me pray.