

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Last Sunday after Trinity – Bible Sunday – 25th October 2020

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Matthew 22.40

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Today we come to the conclusion of the Sundays after Trinity. Perhaps a relief for some! Next week, following All Saints Day, we move into the Kingdom season, and then on into the new liturgical year with Advent. In our modern Church Calendar, today is also observed as Bible Sunday with its wonderful collect:

*Blessed Lord,
who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

For me this is one of the most profound and beautiful prayers in our liturgical worship. Always worth repeating, it's a most appropriate prayer to use every time we open our bibles to read and reflect on the scriptures.

The original version appeared in the Prayer Book of 1552. Written by Thomas Cranmer for the Second Sunday of Advent, it reflects the opening words of the Epistle for that day: *Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for*

our learning; that we, through patience and comfort of the scriptures, might have hope. (Romans 15.4)

This treasure of an Anglican prayer remained in its place in Advent in the Book of Common Prayer, but was perhaps overshadowed by other seasonal themes. At the beginning of this century it was moved to the conclusion of the Trinity season, as a summing up of all the scriptures read throughout the liturgical year. It prompts us to reflect. What does the Bible mean to us? Where does it fit into our lives? How much of it have we read?

In my early days as an assistant curate, I think I may still have been a deacon at the time, I met a parishioner who had been a held captive by the Japanese in the Second World War. He proudly told me that while a prisoner, he'd 'taught himself the Bible'. What he meant, in fact, was that he'd learned to roll off the names of the books which he'd proudly do every time I visited him. He'd then challenge me to do the same, which I just about managed - with his promptings. One day I asked him if he'd read the whole of the Bible. He admitted he'd started, but was freed from captivity before he got beyond Genesis, and never got round to it when he got home.

He then, of course, challenged me with the same question. I had to admit that I'd never read it from cover to cover, which is still the case. However, in the recitation of the daily office of Morning and Evening Prayer, and our readings at the Eucharist, over the years I've probably covered most of it by following the various lectionaries authorised over the past five or six decades.

Before we move on, may I share other personal experiences? Here's my first bible, a Christmas present in 1949, when I was eight. Can you remember when you were given your first copy of the Bible? When you opened it? How much you read? I think I managed to read the first eight chapters - perhaps pleased to read that Noah had come safely through the flood! That was enough for an eight year old. I did, however, once read the whole of the New Testament. I was just beginning my ordination training when its New English Bible translation came out in 1961. We were encouraged to read it as a whole as our book for Lent. The full version of the NEB had to wait until 1970.

I suppose over the years I have found it something of a frustration, not finding the time or perhaps the enthusiasm to sit down and read the Bible as a whole. I've

waded through Tolstoy's War and Peace and have just completed Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy, but the Bible as bedtime reading has never seemed to be my scene.

But I am pleased to announce, that in our gospel passage for today, Jesus gives us the whole of the Bible and its core message in three short verses: *'He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." ' (Matthew 22. 37 – 39)*

A most appropriate reading for Bible Sunday, and Jesus attests to this himself, in the words of our text. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

For Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, there was a vast array of detailed commandments to be followed, covering every aspect and circumstance of daily life. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, thought he could catch Jesus out, with a question about which law was the most important. Jesus gives the response that the love of God and our neighbour is all that is required. This is what the whole of scripture is all about.

The whole Bible Story is one long tale of God calling us to be part of his divine loving nature. Our being, made in the image of God as described in Genesis 1.26, is to be made in his love. And God is love. *Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4. 8 & 16b.)*

The entire Bible Story centres around God's call to humanity: the call to learn to love God with their whole being and to love those around them, near and far, as themselves. The Bible tells us of people learning and failing in their love of God and neighbourhoods, and God in his love coming to the rescue in the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We could say the Bible is the greatest love story ever told, as summed up in these three verses from today's gospel.

Jesus is of course quoting two well known verses from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6.5: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* To these he adds words from Leviticus 19. 18, the final verse of our first reading this morning: *You shall not take vengeance or*

bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Before the story of the Good Samaritan, the lawyer quotes the Summary of the Law, and then asks who is his neighbour. Jesus replies with the parable and his meaning is clear: our neighbours are not limited to the people we may know next door.

We need to understand that Jesus draws together these two simple, but profound commandments to love, because they complement each other. We cannot love God without loving our neighbour, for by loving our neighbour we love God in a practical and tangible manner. Our love for him cannot be expressed solely in an individual, private and personal spirituality. It needs physical expression in the activities and encounters of our daily lives.

Like the lawyer, we need clarity about who is our neighbour. It's certainly the people who live and work around us every day. But in our world of modern communication it's also those we encounter over the airwaves. Yes, even those who we find difficult, objectionable and hard to cope with. We're called to *love* our neighbours, even though we may not necessarily like them. I'm sure God often dislikes the things I do or say, but it does not stop him loving me. A parent may say to an errant child, " I don't like what you are doing, but I still love you." Both Matthew (16.23) and Mark (8.33) record how Jesus severely reprimanded Peter. Did "Get behind me, Satan" mark the end of his love?

In Deuteronomy we are called to love God with our whole being, heart, soul, mind and might. The parable of the Good Samaritan goes further, adding 'strength' and 'our neighbours as ourselves'. Yes, love *ourselves*! For if God loves us why shouldn't we also love ourselves? And in fact, how are we going to love others if we cannot love ourselves? This has nothing to do with the self-regarding love which leads to the exclusion of others, but an acceptance of oneself, knowing oneself accepted and loved by God.

Divine love, the image of God in us, is absolute inclusiveness. In God, no one is excluded, by either race, colour or ethnicity, nor by religious faith or none. Personal orientation, political belief, cultural or social background: all are irrelevant, for all people are loved by God. And we are to answer in the same way the call to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

The Bible is the book of Love. The word love appears from 514 to 810 times depending on the various translations. Today, on Bible Sunday, we give thanks to God for the wonderful treasure of the holy scriptures. But we need to remember some words of the scholarly and saintly Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, *“The central fact of Christianity is not a Book but Person - Jesus Christ, himself described as the Word of God.”* (*The Authority of the Bible, Peck’s Commentary on the Bible. 1963*)

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them.

Amen.