

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Last Sunday after Trinity – Bible Sunday – 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**Service at All Saints' Marseille**

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Have you ever asked yourself the question: what is the most important thing? To some it will be family, to others work, to others friendships, to others faith. The answer may be different at different times in our lives.

The context of the exchange we have just heard between Jesus and the lawyer is the gradual tightening of the noose around Jesus, as he teaches in the Temple in the days leading up to his arrest. One by one the religious authorities in Jerusalem – Herodians, Sadducees and Pharisees – challenge him, asking him questions, trying to trip him up as they wonder who this man is from the backwater of Galilee who is teaching on their patch. Today it's the turn of the Pharisees, and one of them asks: 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' There were 613 commandments in the Law, and the focus of the Pharisees' religious life was on keeping each one in careful detail.

We don't know what was in the mind of the lawyer who asked the question. Was it a trick question, or might it have been a genuine desire to find out what mattered most to this teacher, what lay at the heart of the kingdom of which he taught? Jesus answers from the heart of the Jewish tradition, quoting the

Scriptures: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' – words from the Book of Deuteronomy which many would have regarded as the central commandment. But Jesus goes on - there's a second which is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' – words from the Book of Leviticus which we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning. And then comes the punchline: 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'. In other words, the whole of the Old Testament – and, by implication, the New – are summed up in these words.

That's a very suitable reading for today, which the church keeps as Bible Sunday. After all of Jesus's teaching and preaching, encounters and healing, travelling and gathering, just days before his crucifixion, he names what is most important to his mission, his ministry and the kingdom of which he taught: it is love. The narrative sweep of the Bible speaks of God calling humanity, made in his image, to be part of the divine nature, which is love. We read in the first Letter of John: 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.' (I John 4.7-8)

Jesus's answer to the lawyer is beautiful in its subtlety. By responding to the question 'which is the greatest commandment?' by naming two things, he suggests they are two sides of the same coin. You cannot love God without loving your neighbour. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a wonderful illustration of that truth. I suspect we have all met people who are fervent in their faith but can come across as cold-hearted towards their fellow beings. Some of you will have read François Mauriac's novel *La Pharisienne* (translated

in English as *Woman of the Pharisees*), which offers a graphic portrayal of that tendency.

If we are honest, perhaps there's a bit of it in all of us who go to church. It actually involves a misguided form of self-protection – focusing too much on our piety because we don't want God to see who we really are, as we are afraid God won't like what he sees. But this is to forget the insight which we learn from Psalm 139 - 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ... you are acquainted with all my ways.' The psalmist describes all the ways in which we try in vain to escape from God's sight – 'If I say "Surely the darkness will cover me" ... even the darkness is not dark to you.' Yet the psalm ends with self-acceptance and humility: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting'. At the end there is an openness and trust that we have to do with a God of infinite mercy, who knows us better than we know ourselves. A God who is Love.

If we look again at Jesus's response to the lawyer who was testing him, we notice that it contains not two things, but three: in addition to loving God, we are to love our neighbour 'as ourselves'. We are given to understand that you cannot love your neighbour without loving yourself. And you cannot love yourself well until you have a sense of God and neighbour. One of the most important things we learn while we are growing up is that we are not the centre of the universe. It's a vital part of maturing, and every parent knows to their cost how hard it is to teach and to learn. But if we are to emerge into adulthood as balanced individuals, it is a necessary process. The ancients understood it well - from Greek mythology we get the word narcissism, that distortion of proper forms of care for oneself which tips into excessive need for admiration, the unremitting

search for power and a lack of empathy. There is deep wisdom in the advice to direct our love away from ourselves to the creator of all and to our fellow beings.

Yet we mustn't go too far in the other direction. We have all met people who are so focussed on the needs of others that they forget their own needs and become exhausted in the process, which in turn makes them less able to help. Perhaps there's a bit of that in all of us too some of the time. Two hundred years ago the French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the term 'altruism', which means living a life for others. Since then people have often assumed that altruism is what Christianity is all about. But altruism assumes that in order to love others more, you need to love yourself less. It takes love to be finite, a system in which if you give in one place you have to take away somewhere else. But that's not the Gospel, as we see from Jesus's reply to the lawyer in our reading today.

If you ever find yourself feeling like one of those people I have just described, try turning the words round sometimes: 'Love yourself as your neighbour'. Try thinking of yourself as the first among the neighbours God calls you to love. For God loves every one of us while still loving each of us as if we were the only one. And we are able to love others because of the way God loves us. To accept that love, we have to learn to love ourselves properly.

Love of God, love of neighbour, love of self. Jesus invites us into a triangle of commitment that, if we will allow it to, can transform our experience and enable us to feel fully alive. A habit of thought and practice which calls us to reflect when considering each issue, each action, each decision that comes our way: 'how, in this, am I loving God, neighbour and self?'

Jesus said: 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'  
It's all about balance, and it's all about love.

Amen.