

Love God; love your neighbour...

... Impossible without Jesus

A sermon given on the Twentieth Sunday of Trinity, 20th October 2020, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Minster.

Matthew 22.34-end

If somebody asked you to sum up your philosophy of life in a single sentence or sound-bite, I wonder what you would say. Some people have a rather despairing outlook on life and sum it up in phrases we would all recognise: look after number one; it's a dog eat dog world; it's a jungle out there; or as one primary school child put it, do unto others before they do unto you.

In a pandemic, a lot of people are saying to each other, "Stay safe." But as a philosophy of life, that's perhaps a little risk-averse. Some people try to express a more positive outlook. There's Mark Twain's, "Let us endeavour to live so that when we die, even the undertaker will be sorry." Or Christian Aid, "We believe in life before death." Or how about this from the playwright and former president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel, "Keep the company of those who seek the truth and run away from those who have found it"; or this one from Jiminy Cricket, "Always let your conscience be your guide."

There's no shortage of opinions about this, and in our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is asked about his philosophy of life, "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law?" In other words, 'How should we live? What's the most important thing in life?' And Jesus says, "Love God, and love your neighbour". And in one sense, there was nothing terribly controversial about that; probably most people would have substantially agreed with Jesus in his response. One of the great Jewish teachers of that time, a contemporary of Jesus, was a man known as Rabbi Hillel, who was once asked to teach the law while standing on one leg, a way of asking him to give his own summary of the law, but to keep it short. And Rabbi Hillel said, "What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary."

Jesus's instruction to love God was even less controversial because he was quoting not just a commandment, but the Jewish daily prayer originating in the book of Deuteronomy and still used by Jewish people today, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' What perhaps was new was bringing these two traditional statements together.

What has a loving God to do with loving our neighbour? A little further on in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and goats when the people who are welcomed into the kingdom of heaven are those who have helped the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the sick and those in prison. And at the end of the parable, the king says, "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." In other words, the way we respond to other people is the only true measure of how we are responding to God. And the reason why loving God and loving our neighbour belong together is because our neighbour bears the image of God; to love our neighbour is to love God's image, and to neglect our neighbour is to neglect God's image.

In the words of Jean Valjean, the hero of that very Christian musical, *Les Miserables*, "To love another person is to see the face of God." And in one sense, that isn't very profound, is it? Jesus seems to be saying the same as every other great moral teacher, 'Love God and love your neighbour.' It's so obvious, it's almost a platitude. And if we're not careful, we can be lulled into thinking that because it's easy to say, it must be easy to do: 'Love God and love your neighbour.'

I have a feeling I may have mentioned before, a lovely old lady in one of my former parishes who couldn't be doing with my masterful theological sermons, and she used to say, "Jonathan, just tell us to love each other." But I think that's exactly the problem: we all know we ought to love each other and you don't need me to tell you that. The problem is we find it so often difficult: even though our neighbour bears the image of God, we don't necessarily want to love her; we may not find ourselves particularly wanting to love the asylum seekers and refugees and migrant workers who come to our town or country; I'm struggling to love a homeless man who keeps on turning up on my doorstep at the moment and sometimes being quite demanding. But even though each one of these people bears the image of God, it's easy to see them as a threat rather than as people who need our help. Just by being there, they threaten our comfort, our security and perhaps our complacency. We may not find it easy to love newcomers, even in our church. It's a bit demanding going up to people you don't know and trying to get to know them. Even though they bear the image of God, it's sometimes much easier staying in our own small group of familiar friends and trying not to notice the strangers or the oddballs or the people who might take up our time.

Because loving people, really loving people, is costly, even though they bear the image of God.

And if we find it difficult to love our neighbour, even though they bear God's image, does that perhaps mean that deep down we don't really want to love God himself? That's a disturbing thought, isn't it, that though we talk about loving God and although we might be very religious, in actual fact we might find that God makes us rather uncomfortable, because we want to stay in control, keep ourselves at the centre, and we fear the approach of God who invites us to surrender our ego and trust only in His love. If a homeless man on my doorstep can trouble my sense of being in control, how much more so when it's the living God who turns up on the doorstep?

And for many of us, religion can actually become a way of keeping God at arm's length. It helps us to manage God and domesticate Him by keeping Him in a controlled environment where He can't do too much damage. And if you're honest with yourself, I think you'll agree that the command to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, with every fibre of your being - is actually impossible. I can't really pretend to love God quite like that. And if I wasn't a clergyman whose job requires him to spend a certain amount of time in church each day, I suspect whole days could go by without my thinking very much about God.

So if the heart of the Christian faith is about loving God and loving my neighbour, I'm in trouble.

And I rather suspect it's not just me. C.S. Lewis, the Oxford academic and the author of the Narnia children's stories, once said it wasn't those parts of the Bible that are hard to understand that he found most difficult; it was the parts of the Bible that he found easy to understand, but difficult to do. It's not difficult to understand Jesus when he says love God and love your neighbour, but it is terribly difficult to do - otherwise the church would be a much more impressive and attractive community than it sometimes seems.

But thankfully, there is more to the Gospel than this. Thankfully, God did not send His son into the world to be crucified and raised in order simply to tell us to love God and love our neighbour. Jesus didn't come in order to tell us something we already knew. God sent His only son into the world not to tell us to love Him, but to reveal His love for us; that we might recognise His love for us in that crucified figure on the cross; that He might receive His love for us in the pouring out of the spirit of Jesus; that we might be changed by His love for us as we try to follow Him. As it says elsewhere in the New Testament, 'This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.'

And that, I think, is what Jesus was driving at in the second part of the Gospel reading with that debate about the son of David. The Pharisees thought God would show His love by sending a second David, a messiah who would be a conquering king, who would satisfy the people's ambition to be free and proud and independent and powerful, and would reinforce their sense that everything was in place and that they were in control. We would all of us love to have a messiah like that.

But Jesus, in response, quotes this psalm where David calls his 'son', 'Lord', suggesting that the Messiah won't be a straightforward second David, but will be bigger than David, more mysterious, with a greater purpose, serving not just his own people, but all the world. David's Lord will come not to make one nation Lord over the others, but to give up himself for the salvation of the world. And the person pointing that out was Jesus, speaking a few days before his death and resurrection to people who are wondering whether perhaps he might be the Messiah.

'Love God and love your neighbour.' It's a tall order, impossible to carry out in our own strength. But we worship one who has fulfilled it, serving God faithfully, even to the point of death; loving his neighbours, you and me, despite our indifference and weakness; loving us through death to resurrection so that we might share in his love, be opened up to it, and learn to live more and more in the ways of loving God and loving one another.

So may you meet David's son and David's Lord in Your Worship this morning. May you be strengthened by his words to you and by the gift of his body and blood given for you, and may you be sent out in the power of his Spirit to love your God and to love your neighbour.

Reading Text

Matthew 22.34-end

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ 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.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." ⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" '? ⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.