

## St Marylebone Last Sunday after Trinity 2014 11 am

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This year we have been reading through Matthew's gospel.

No-one who has read Matthew's gospel narrative can be unaware of the tensions which mount between Jesus and his disciples on the one hand, and the Pharisees and the Scribes on the other.

Quite often the exchanges are the verbal equivalents of a boxing match. A few bobs and weaves here, a bit of ducking there, a point scored and then retreat to respective corners before the bell rings for the next round.

Well, the bell has been rung and once again this morning, Jesus and his disciples square up to their opponents.

The opening exchange comes from the Pharisees, in the form of yet another trick question designed to land a fatal blow against the upstart rabbi from Galilee, or at least provide a convincing knock out.

Jesus had already, it seems, dealt a final knockout blow to the Sadducees and perhaps the Pharisees wanted to ram home the point that they could and would do better.

The question raised by the Pharisees is a typical rabbi to rabbi question: *Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*<sup>i</sup>

Now the Pharisees reckoned that there were 613 distinct commandments in the Law, not all of equal weight, and Jesus digs down deep into the roots of Judaism before trying to parry what has been meant as a body blow.

Through his answer, Jesus shows the Pharisees that his knowledge and understanding of the Torah, the Law, goes far beyond what they expect to hear.

Indeed, Jesus' carefully weighted answer seems to distil the very essence of the Law and the Prophets as he brings together two separate commandments in such a way that his answer not only encapsulates the whole of Law and the Prophets but allows each to shed a new and fresher light on the other.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself.* Jesus not only answers the Pharisee's question but goes way beyond it.

In his carefully chosen and phrased answer, Jesus brings together the *Shema* which comes from Deuteronomy<sup>ii</sup> and a text from Leviticus<sup>iii</sup>.

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. Barukh sheim k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed  
V'ahav'ta eit Adonai Elohekha b'khol l'vav'kha uv'khol naf'sh'kha uv'khol m'odekha.

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.  
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

The *Shema*, the closest thing that Judaism has to a basic and essential creed and the words open every Jewish service and act of worship.

The *Shema* is the first text learned by heart by every Jewish child and to this very basic text, Jesus adds words from Leviticus, the full text being *Do not seek*

*revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.<sup>iv</sup>*

Together, these two texts, deeply embedded in Jewish worship and scripture, are cleverly used by Jesus to sum up all 613 laws: the Ten Commandments<sup>v</sup> and every other law that had come into force through the Hebrew centuries.

But Jesus is not just answering a trick question; he is also laying out very clearly before the Scribes and the Pharisees the nature of his own mission to God's Chosen People; he is telling them very plainly just what it is that motivates him and guides him: it is no coincidence that Leviticus 19.18 is quoted three times in Matthew's gospel, more than any other text from Jewish scriptures!

Jesus answer fuses religion and ethics by bringing love of God and service of neighbour into direct and intimate relationship with the most basic of all commandments: to put God first, above and beyond all else.

A few chapters later, Matthew gives us Jesus' parable of the division of the sheep and the goats,<sup>vi</sup> a parable

which states unequivocally that God is to be found in the service of others.

*As you did it to the least of these, Jesus says, you did it unto me.<sup>vii</sup>*

For Jesus service to one's neighbour is service to Christ himself, and to serve Christ is to serve God.

Whatever it was that the Pharisees were trying to do; Jesus turns the confrontation on its head and a sparring bout becomes an eloquent discourse about the nature of God and humankind and the mission of the Messiah, God's Anointed One.

To be truly religious, argues Jesus is not about creating a league table of commandments, but about loving God and loving the neighbour whom God has created in his own image and set beside you.

*This* is what God's love incarnate looks like, says Jesus. It is, after all, what his whole ministry and mission were all about.

And the task of the truly religious person is not to hold some nebulous or amorphous theoretical and sentimental disposition towards God or one's

neighbour: it is about real, concrete commitment of heart and soul and mind in the love of God and the everyday service of one's fellow men and women, no matter what the cost.

Service of neighbour, argues Jesus, is simply the other side of the coin that is loving worship of God.

Because men and women are made in the image of God<sup>viii</sup>, they have to be taken seriously, says Jesus.

Men and women are not just a haphazard collection of random elements, the sum total of a set of inorganic and organic chemical formulae.

Men and women are God's very image, and for that very reason - if for no other - one's fellow men and women must be loved and served, no matter how marred God's image is in them.

*If you really and truly love God, says Jesus, then you have no option but to love and serve your fellow men and women too.*

The very basis of loving one's neighbour is God's very self and being, God's image imprinted in the very DNA of humanity.

No wonder so much contemporary ethics goes so awry. It tries to do without the God 'bit', but, of course, it can't, because once God has been written out of the equation what is left is indeed a haphazard collection of random elements, the sum total of a set of inorganic and organic chemical formulae?

As William Barclay, the great Biblical commentator and scholar put it half a century ago: *Man is nothing but a 'machine-minder'*.<sup>ix</sup>

Love of God and Love of neighbour go hand in hand.

'How can one say 'I love God, and hate my brother?''<sup>x</sup>  
The one part is the foundation of, and the inspiration for, the other.

That is why, if we have a grievance against our brother we are to leave our gift at the altar and go and reconcile that grievance before we can turn in worship to God.

We cannot worship God without serving our brother.

To love God is 'to love my neighbour'.<sup>xi</sup>

*The Pharisees asked, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all*

*your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 22.36

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 6.5

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 19.18

<sup>iv</sup> Leviticus 19.18

<sup>v</sup> Exodus 20.1-17 & Deuteronomy 5.4-21

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 25.31-46

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 25.40

<sup>viii</sup> Genesis 1.26-27

<sup>ix</sup> William Barclay, Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, the Daily Study Bible, Second Impression November 1959

<sup>x</sup> 1 John 4.20

<sup>xi</sup> John Chrysostom quoted in Matthew 19-28, W D Davies and D C Allison, T & T Clark, 1997, p. 244 q.v. You have seen your brother, you have seen God, Tertullian and others, op. cit. p. 244