



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

**Trinity 18 2020 8.30 am**

*1 Corinthians 1.4-8 & Matthew 22.34-end (Sermon)*

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

Prime Minister, *What are the exact Covid Restriction rules in Newcastle under Lyme as of 3.17 this afternoon?*

Chancellor, *How much did Mrs Smith of Gunnersbury Mansions, Acton actually receive in Personal Independent Payments between 4 pm on Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> October and 11 am on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October?*

Jesus, *Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*

There is always someone eager to score a point by tripping someone else up with a question or two designed purely and simply to make the questioning look clever and the answerer look stupid.

It happened to Jesus all the time. Wherever he went, it seemed, there was someone chancing their arm by bowling a googly.

In today's gospel reading, the fourth of Matthew's great controversy stories, a Pharisee (typical) asks Jesus, *Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*

Not, *which of the Ten Commandments is the greatest?*, by the way, but *which of the 613 distinct commandments we rabbis have identified and enumerated in the Law - as we interpret it - is the greatest commandment in the Law?*

Although, perhaps, what Jesus should have said was, *Ask me one about Selkirk and Peebles!* Jesus instead, through the answer he gives, distils the very essence of the whole of the Hebrew Law and Prophets.

Creatively and daringly, Jesus, the Rabbis' Rabbi, brings together two commandments in a way that not only summarises the whole of Law and the Prophets, but which allows each commandment to shed a new light on the other.

*'Love God. Love your neighbour.'* Do these things, says Jesus, and you won't go far wrong! Next question!

Jesus takes the *Shema*<sup>i</sup>, the sentence which opens every Jewish service and act of worship; the very first text learned by heart by every Jewish child, the nearest things Judaism has to a basic and essential creed and then he turns to the book of Leviticus<sup>ii</sup> and in one short pregnant sentence he summarises not only the Ten Commandments but the whole of the Law and the Prophets.

He also summarizes his own mission into the bargain, laying out, very clearly, before the Scribes and the Pharisees who he is and what he is doing.

Jesus fuses together religion and ethics by bringing love and service-of-neighbour together in direct intimate relation with the basic commandment to love God.

A few chapters later on Matthew will give his readers Jesus' parable of the division of the sheep and the goats: a parable which states quite clearly Jesus' claim that service to God is to be found primarily in serving other people: "*As you did it to the least of these*", he says, "*... you did it unto me*".

To serve one's neighbour is to serve Christ, himself, and to serve Christ is to serve God.

To be truly religious then, argues Jesus is to love God and to love the neighbour whom God has created in his own image and set besides you.

This love of God and love of neighbour, as Jesus shows throughout his whole ministry, is not about some nebulous *sentimentality* for either or even for both, it is about total commitment and service - no matter what the cost. Devotion to God in worship, is simply the other side of the coin that is practical service of neighbour.

Precisely because man is made in the image of God, he has to be taken seriously. He is not just a collection of random elements, the sum total of a set of inorganic and organic

chemical formulae; he is the very image of God, and for that very reason - if for no other - man is to be loved and served.

If one loves God then one has no option but to love neighbour too. Take away the God-bit from man and what is left?

Jesus says that the love of neighbour is firmly grounded in the love of God. It should be of little wonder then, that our contemporary ethical code has gone so awry, it tries to do without God, and it can't because once one has written God out of the equation what is man but, as the great commentator William Barclay put it, nothing but a 'machine-minder'.

Love of God and Love of neighbour two sides of the same coin.

'How can anyone say *'I love God, and hate my brother.'*?' asks Jesus. Each is the foundation of - and the inspiration for -the other.

This is why, if we have a grievance against our brother, we have to leave our gift at the altar and go and reconcile the grievance before we can turn in worship to God: we cannot worship God without serving our brother.

*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> Deuteronomy 6.5

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19.18