

Year A Proper 30, 29th October 2023

Leviticus 19:1-2 & 15-18

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

The greatest commandment – ‘to love...’

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself.”

It is quite something to make a claim that just twenty-four words, contained in two commandments, is the sum of all the writings in the Torah and in the writings and works of the Prophets.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus said to the Pharisees who were, once again, trying to find a way to silence Jesus, to trap him, to make him unpopular with the fickle crowds around the Temple precinct.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself.”

So, I wonder, what does, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’, look like? As we say this, Sunday by Sunday, do we allow these words to transform us, and if so, how do they transform us?

For surely, Jesus said these words, so that the words would have an impact on those who heard them and would help bring God’s kingdom to earth. Jesus, was, after all, focussed on helping people understand the true nature of God, and through his actions he gave so many wonderful glimpses of what God’s kingdom on earth could look like. A kingdom that would transform lives. So, coming back to the question, what does ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’, look like, I believe the short answer is partly contained in the second commandment, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. It is no accident in the ordering of commandments that these two are the first two and are inextricably linked together. I say partly contained in the second commandment, because it shouldn’t greatly surprise you that I also think acts of worship are part of the human response to God’s love for us. Worship is our own offering showing our love of God and helps us

get a recharge of our faith batteries to go out in love and peace to serve the world.

‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ sound deceptively easy, doesn’t it? But, let’s be frank, it can be incredibly difficult. Partly because none of us are perfect; we can respond in ways that show a lack of compassion, an unwillingness to understand the others position, an unwillingness to let go of long-held beliefs and values, or to admit we were wrong. Or maybe the other person follows a different faith or belief system, or any number of other things...

I am going to circulate a handout, with quite a few sayings on them. They all relate to God’s love, in one way or another, and how we may view our faith. I would ask you to read them through. Notice which ones you rest easily with you and those that unsettle you. In a time of silence, invite God to be with you in your reactions. I suggest you repeat the second commandment, and look afresh at each saying, and notice the sayings that unsettle you, and open yourself up to God’s guidance.

Time for reflection...

Archbishop Oscar Romero said, ‘A church that does not provoke any crisis, a gospel that does not unsettle, a Word of God that does not get under anyone’s skin, what kind of gospel is that? Preachers who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed do not light up the world.’

It is seldom I intentionally try to unsettle, and I have often not gone very far into subjects I suspected would be termed ‘thorny’ by some. Some of you may be aware that I have long been concerned about the plight of the Palestinian peoples. As the UN Secretary-General said on 24th October (UN Day), the atrocities of 7th October did not happen in a vacuum¹. He was forthright in his condemnation of the Hamas killings and was clear that the killings by the Israeli Defence Forces of innocent Palestinians living in Gaza was a crime, as defined by International Law. Saying this does not make him, or me by repeating it, an antisemite. That has been a sadly effective method of silencing criticism of the Zionist policies of the Israeli Government for many years. The Ignatian Exercises start with an exercise in understanding the ripple effect of not being able to show love for our neighbour; how one action that is not of God, that when not corrected, can lead to tremendous damage. Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is an extremely tragic example of this. Opportunities to reset the

relationship have been missed over many years, and today we are witnessing what looks like genocide for the people of Gaza. To avoid further killings of the innocent Palestinians in Gaza, I have written to my MP asking him to support an Early Day Motion calling for an immediate ceasefire. Together with continuing to donate to the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians, and praying for peace is about as much as I can do. I am sure Jesus would and does weep for all who have been killed in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories over the last 75 years and continues to weep for those who will be killed. He wept over Jerusalem, knowing its population would suffer if there was an uprising against the Romans, and we know that this happened.

I want to come back to our local situation, and to finish with words of challenge and hope for us. They are words from Romans Chapter 12, which I think are probably a better match to the gospel reading than the 1 Thessalonians passage the Lectionary give us. I am reading from the New Living Translation.

⁹Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other. ¹¹Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. ¹²Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. ¹³When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

¹⁷Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honourable. ¹⁸Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

We may currently be small in number, but if we can consistently show love for each other, and show love for our neighbours, geographically local and across the world – evidence that we are inspired by the love of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit – then we shall once more grow in numbers.

The Shema is at the heart of today's gospel reading, and Jesus calls us to follow him by doing all we can to adhere to it. In so doing we worship God in ways that I am sure please God.

So, let us love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds. And let us love your neighbour as we do ourselves.

Sermon handout: Proper 30, 29th October 2023

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself.”

‘When interpreting the Bible, filter it through the larger Biblical theology of ‘God is love’. If where your interpretation end up excludes, belittles, is violent, ignores those in need, or allows you to feel superior to others, it isn’t loving. It isn’t from Love. It isn’t from God.’ Rev Mark Sandlin

‘A Christian is: a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks, and a hand through which Christ helps.’ St Augustine

¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. ¹¹ Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

Psalm 85

‘We worshipped Jesus instead of following Him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us a religion of ‘belonging and believing’ instead of a religion of transformation.’ Richard Rohr

‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.’ Hillel the Elder

‘Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.’ Viktor Frankl

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls and security within your towers.”

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, “Peace be within you.”

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Psalm 122

‘You need power only when you want to do something harmful; otherwise, love is enough to get everything done.’ Charlie Chaplin

‘Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

ⁱ Mr. President, with your permission, I will make a small introduction and then ask my colleagues to brief the Security Council on the situation on the ground. Excellencies, the situation in the Middle East is growing more dire by the hour. The war in Gaza is raging and risks spiralling throughout the region. Divisions are splintering societies. Tensions threaten to boil over. At a crucial moment like this, it is vital to be clear on principles -- starting with the fundamental principle of respecting and protecting civilians.

I have condemned unequivocally the horrifying and unprecedented 7 October acts of terror by Hamas in Israel. Nothing can justify the deliberate killing, injuring and kidnapping of civilians – or the launching of rockets against civilian targets. All hostages must be treated humanely and released immediately and without conditions. I respectfully note the presence among us of members of their families.

Excellencies, it is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum. The Palestinian people have been subjected to 56 years of suffocating occupation. They have seen their land steadily devoured by settlements and plagued by violence; their economy stifled; their people displaced and their homes demolished. Their hopes for a political solution to their plight have been vanishing. But the grievances of the Palestinian people cannot justify the appalling attacks by Hamas. And those appalling attacks cannot justify the collective punishment of the Palestinian people.

Excellencies, even war has rules. We must demand that all parties uphold and respect their obligations under international humanitarian law; take constant care in the conduct of military operations to spare civilians; and respect and protect hospitals and respect the inviolability of UN facilities which today are sheltering more than 600,000 Palestinians.

The relentless bombardment of Gaza by Israeli forces, the level of civilian casualties, and the wholesale destruction of neighbourhoods continue to mount and are deeply alarming. I mourn and honour the dozens of UN colleagues working for UNRWA – sadly, at least 35 and counting – killed in the bombardment of Gaza over the last two weeks. I owe to their families my condemnation of these and many other similar killings. The protection of civilians is paramount in any armed conflict.

Protecting civilians can never mean using them as human shields. Protecting civilians does not mean ordering more than one million people to evacuate to the south, where there is no shelter, no food, no water, no medicine and no fuel, and then continuing to bomb the south itself.

I am deeply concerned about the clear violations of international humanitarian law that we are witnessing in Gaza. Let me be clear: No party to an armed conflict is above international humanitarian law.

Excellencies, thankfully, some humanitarian relief is finally getting into Gaza. But it is a drop of aid in an ocean of need. In addition, our UN fuel supplies in Gaza will run out in a matter of days. That would be another disaster.

Without fuel, aid cannot be delivered, hospitals will not have power, and drinking water cannot be purified or even pumped. The people of Gaza need continuous aid delivery at a level that corresponds to the enormous needs. That aid must be delivered without restrictions. I salute our UN colleagues and humanitarian partners in Gaza working under hazardous conditions and risking their lives to provide aid to those in need. They are an inspiration. To ease epic suffering, make the delivery of aid easier and safer, and facilitate the release of hostages, I reiterate my appeal for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire.

Excellencies, even, in this moment of grave and immediate danger, we cannot lose sight of the only realistic foundation for a true peace and stability: a two-State solution. Israelis must see their legitimate needs for security materialized, and Palestinians must see their legitimate aspirations for an independent State realized, in line with United Nations resolutions, international law and previous agreements.

Finally, we must be clear on the principle of upholding human dignity.

Polarization and dehumanization are being fuelled by a tsunami of disinformation. We must stand up to the forces of antisemitism, anti-Muslim bigotry and all forms of hate.

Mr. President, Excellencies, today is United Nations Day, marking 78 years since the UN Charter entered into force. That Charter reflects our shared commitment to advance peace, sustainable development and human rights. On this UN Day, at this critical hour, I appeal to all to pull back from the brink before the violence claims even more lives and spreads even farther.

Thank you very much.