

Pentecost 21 25th October 2020

Matthew 22:34-46

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

Last week we heard about the attempt by the Pharisees to entrap Jesus with a question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor.

This week, another group from within the Jewish community, called the Sadducees, tries another trick question, **“which commandment in the law is the greatest”**. Another way of saying this might be, “are there some parts of scripture which are more important than others?”.

According to Jesus the answer is YES - there are some passages in scripture which are more important than others.

According to Jesus the two most important commandments are these:

Firstly, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”** (this commandment is taken from Deuteronomy Chapter 6)

The other most important commandment, according to Jesus is this: **“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”** (this commandment is taken from Leviticus Chapter 19).

Jesus says, **“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”**. So what Jesus is saying is that these two commandment are like a tree, and all the rest of the scriptures hang off this tree like fruit. So if we are reading the bible and we come across something that we don't understand, a helpful questions to ask is, “in what way is this passage illustrating the more underlying point which is to love God and to love my neighbour?”

But what does it really mean to love God? What does it mean to love our neighbour?

Love is a very overused word. If we turn on the radio we will hear a thousand songs about love. If we turn on the TV we will see a thousand movies and soap operas in which people are falling in and out of love. These are the things which shape our understanding of what love means.

One of the problems in talking about love is that in English we have only one word for love...the word “Love”. But in Greek, there are several words which express different aspects of love. For example, there is EROS; PHILOS; and “AGAPE”.

- (i) There is EROS, from which we get the word, “EROTICA”...I trust that I've got all our attention. EROS is the kind of love that centres on feelings, particularly the aesthetics of bodily feeling. It is EROS that is in full flight when we first fall in love and are full of warm gooey and highly charged feelings for another person. This is the stuff of romantic love. It is this kind of love which absolutely dominates Western society. “If it feels good DO it, and if it doesn't feel good that don't do it”.

Most of the love songs and modern movies we watch are built around EROTIC love. So for example, if we watch a movie and there is a beautiful man and woman falling for each other, then the director will keep the sexual tension building right until the end, when we finally have that wonderful kiss, and everyone lives happily ever after. A popular examples would

be "Sleepless in Seattle". Gorgeous mush between two gorgeous actors from beginning to end.

- (ii) Another kind of love is PHILOS, or friendship. Friendship is based around shared understanding; shared interests, shared commitment to give and take. Broadly speaking whereas EROS says, "I love you because it makes me feel good", PHILOS says, "I love you because I understand you and you understand me. When young couples say to me during wedding preparation, "We were friends long before we fell in love (by which they mean they fell into erotic feelings for each other)", then I feel a bit more hopeful about the long term survivability of the relationship.

But relationships based on PHILOS alone can also deteriorate. If PHILOS is about understanding the other, we can get a shock when the other person changes. "I love you because I understand you and you understand me". But what happens when you change to such an extent that I no longer understand you. Perhaps now I feel that I have fallen OUT of love once again.

- (iii) A third kind of love in the Greek language is APAPE. AGAPE does not depend warm feelings for another or on understanding another. AGAPE centres on unconditional commitment to another. The word that Jesus uses in the two great commandments which we hear in the gospel tonight, based on Deuteronomy and Leviticus is AGAPE. The word, AGAPE means a stubborn, unwavering commitment to the other....AGAPE lies at the base of God's covenant or steadfast commitment to us.

AGAPE is a Christlike love – it is faithfulness to another which will go to the cross for someone. When I love someone with Agape, I am asking "what does God want for this person?" rather than what I want.

This is why Jesus places LOVE of God before love of neighbour. Both are important, but AGAPE of neighbour relies on having a knowledge and experience of Christlike love. I can only have AGAPE for my neighbour when I truly know how deeply GOD loves ME AND how much God loves that other person.

The first letter of John 4:10, puts it this way: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us",

So when Jesus says, "Love your enemies", he's not expecting us to have warm or gooey feelings towards them (EROS). Rather, Jesus is expecting us to perceived that person as someone that God has given his life for.

All of these kinds of love are important, EROS, PHILOS and AGAPE all have a place to play in our relationships with others.

But it is AGAPE with which God loves the world – with unwavering faithfulness for all, which becomes the model for our faithfulness to each other.

When have you had an experience of unwavering faithfulness in your life? How did this experience affect or even change your life?