

Thought for the Day, 28 March 2023

The greatest commandment: Matthew 22.34-40



When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ 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.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it:

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

All Anglican communion services used to begin with the reading of the Ten Commandments. (We still do this in Lent!) Moreover, the Commandments were inscribed for all to see on boards behind the altar; and you had to learn them all by heart. (In St Philip & St James, you can see the Ten Commandments behind the altar on the wall of St James’ Chapel, just below the window that shows Moses giving the Commandments and Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount.)

These days we don’t hear so much about the Ten Commandments. I suppose they are felt to be a bit negative (all those thou shalt not’s), a bit forbidding, religion as a series of prohibitions.

Nowadays we want to be more positive, more open, more inviting. So in our modern liturgies we prefer to read Jesus’s summary of the Law, as given in the passage above.

Traditionally there were considered to be 613

commandments in the Torah, the Law of Moses. But Jesus boils them all down to two: love God, and love your neighbour. The law of Christ is the law of love (as Paul says also: love is the fulfilling of the law.)

That certainly sounds a lot more attractive than all the detailed prescriptions of the Torah, not to mention all the thou shalt nots.

More attractive perhaps, but certainly no easier! The trouble with Jesus's two laws is that they are completely open-ended, completely unlimited. With the precise and detailed laws of the Torah, you know where you are; you know precisely what you have to do and what you have to avoid doing. In theory you could follow all those laws, or at least you can make a precise tally of where you have succeeded and where you have fallen short.

But Jesus tells us to love God with our whole being: our thinking, our emotions, our actions. God is to be the centre of your whole life. How would you ever fulfil that command? How would you ever know that you had fulfilled it?

And loving your neighbour as yourself: does that

sound perhaps just a little more defined? But the trouble is that Jesus has reinterpreted neighbour to mean, well just about anyone, anyone who needs your help, anyone you are in a position to help. Including those whom you don't feel at all close to, those whom you don't like very much, those you disapprove of (see the parable of the Good Samaritan).

Just as we saw in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's demands are unlimited, impossible to fulfil. They are targets to strive for, but not things that we can "achieve". We'll never be able to sit back satisfied and feel that we have done all that we should.

That sounds rather like bad news: but the good news is that God is merciful. As long as we are aware that we always fall short, as long as we are prepared to come to God in humility and penitence, he will not hold our failings against us. Rather, he will say: Well done, you good and faithful servant: enter into the joy of your Master.

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