

Sunday 6 May 2007

**The Great Commandment
John 13: 34**

"Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Pre-sermon Notes

Given as an introduction to the readings of the day:

"Wrestle with the text" – a term often used

Perhaps prefer "get to grips with" or "grapple" – less aggressive

Work of the preacher: wrestle with their meaning, including context, as well as appropriate application for today.

But it is also the work of the congregation to do the same, to listen and apply. In listening, will need to hear our own responses (usually not voiced), such as "I like that passage and am comfortable with it", "I think I apply that or live by that..."; or "No ways!" or "That's hard – I don't like that / can't apply it".

Some initial comments on OT passage from Leviticus 19.9-18 re context, noting "love in action" in injunctions re caring for the poor, the alien, seeing that justice is done, extolling mercy, etc. How one interprets such passages today, etc.

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**Sermon**

The Gospels reveal that people often questioned Jesus about things he had said, or things on which they wanted his; sometimes out of genuine interest, sometimes to try to catch him out on some or other interpretation of faith.

He was sometimes asked about the commandments, and on one occasion, in response to the injunction to love one's neighbour, Jesus was asked to define "neighbour". That gave rise to the story about the Samaritan, known so well to us.

One strong sect among the Jews, the Pharisees, who are often mentioned in the gospels, had narrow interpretations. They gave attention to the details of religious law, with 613 greater or lesser rules to ensure the Law was kept and even more to ensure they didn't come close to breaking laws. [For those here on Good Friday, I made some detailed reference to that, in expanding how Jesus brought a revolution in grace!]

Jesus' chief criticism of this sect was their obsessive attention to the details in such a way that they lost sight of the bigger picture; a "mechanical" keeping of laws, by keeping to the letter of the law but ignoring the spirit behind them. Such an approach led to hypocrisy, in ignoring the real intent behind the religious codes; they were so focussed on rule keeping that there was no room left for love of God or people. Jesus, our role model in faith, often seemed to break these rules.

Example: Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees fumed, saying it constituted “work” and work could not be done on the Sabbath.

Jesus, knowing that the Sabbath was God’s gift to us, and not a rule to be observed in that way, understood that God’s love was expressed in the gift of healing and wholeness, work that was very appropriately done on the Sabbath. It was the best kind of Godly work there was!

But just because a dominant group of the time reacted in that way, does not mean the whole faith was similarly corrupted; many wonderful teachings and commands of God remain part of our heritage of faith.

We came across some of them in the Levitical law read in the OT passage this morning. We do not still follow ALL the rules listed there, if you were to read the whole book you would immediately see that! But these injunctions, read today, speak primarily of justice and of how we are to treat other people. They are echoed in Jesus’ teaching and in more depth in the teachings of the apostles that followed.

- Everything was based on the underlying command to love God. This was contained in the prayer known as the...
- “Sh’ema Y’israel” – Hebrew for “Hear Israel”
  - “Hear, Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord, is One.” It continues with the command to love the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul.
- A famous, highly regarded Jewish teacher, Hillel, said the following:
  - “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole law, and all else is commentary upon it.”
- Philo of Alexandria, a Greek man who followed the Jewish faith and was a contemporary of Jesus’ time:
  - “There are two basic teachings: One of duty to God, shown in piety and holiness, and one of duty to men, shown in humanity and justice.”

This was the faith for believers in God, which Jesus came to fulfil, to teach, and to expand upon, whilst also fulfilling God’s promise of a Saviour for the world.

On another occasion (cf. Matthew 22), Jesus highlighted that love for God and love for neighbour were inseparable, and were in fact of equal significance. Love for God is concretely experienced as one exercises love for neighbour, but everything depends on recognising that love for neighbour is truly possible only on the basis of love for God.

OT understanding of neighbour: fellow Jews and extended to aliens in the land!

NT understanding: Jesus made it clear, that it encompassed all people, not just those with whom we are comfortable.

Jesus seemed also to understand love as a matter of choice, an exercising of the will, and he highlighted some of the everyday ways in which it is expressed.

To ignore one's neighbour, to ignore one's everyday behaviour, is to distort our faith – even to deny it. Hypocrisy is a failure to tie up what we say with what we do – all guilty to some degree, as we are never perfect, but Jesus is pointing the way for us here, in that true faith acknowledges the link between loving God and loving neighbour.

He is providing an ethic that transcends legalism – legalism being a kind of obsessive preoccupation with determining how many commandments one has obeyed and how many one has failed. It is replaced instead with a love that comes from the whole of our being (heart, mind, soul), which is directed towards God and God's creation, including all our neighbours.

In a sense, therefore, there is only one Commandment to obey: Love.

**“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”**

That's it. It is a distinguishing feature. Yes, we are to be a people of justice, we are to be a people of mercy, and we are to be a people of compassion. Those are all love expressed in action.

But when Jesus said, “Love one another - by this everyone will know that you are my disciples...” we need to understand that this is the boundary marker and distinguishing feature for followers of Christ. And we need to get to grips with that!