

## Two Great Commandments

A sermon by Tom Frame (25/10/20)

Much of our liturgy is deliberate repetition. We hear things over and over again, and then one more time for good measure. And on the great feasts of the church year, we want to hear certain scriptures, to sing certain hymns and to offer certain prayers. The lectionary from which the Bible readings are drawn has a three-year cycle, so we cover all of the major themes in Christian believing, behaving and belonging – and not the favourite hobby horses of the preacher. If we have been attending worship for some time, perhaps all of our lives, we know certain Gospel stories almost by heart. We have heard them before and we know how they finish. So when we hear them read, do we say: got it, I know what that is about ... or, I once heard some wise words on this text, and they are what I think. Does the reading startle you, confront you, challenge you or comfort you ... or is it case of: it's that parable again – nothing new here. What if we were hearing it for the first time or the last time ... would we pause and ponder, and think and reflect a little more?

We have that challenge today in the Gospel reading from Matthew 22: a text we know well because it is part of the standard communion service. We hear it regularly ... if not, all the time. I often introduce verses 37-40 with my own commentary: we are reminded of our duty to God and to neighbour by Jesus who said ... and I rarely stop and take what I am about to say to heart ... to attend to the challenge of what is being put to me and to you in these words. They are profound and problematic: can we, will we ... fulfil these commandments or are they simply a standard or an ordeal to which we might gradually ascend?

Let's consider their origins for a moment. Jesus is asked by those who already have a clear sense of the correct answer: what is the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses? He responds with the two great commandments – to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbour as yourself. What he offers is an answer but also an invitation. These are the heights to which we ought to be moving. Jesus is not, of course, saying something new to the Pharisees. He is simply identifying what is written in the Law of Moses, the Torah – the central message of the first five books of the Bible. He is summing it up in two short commands: *on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets*. This is what the whole teaching of the Old Testament is about –

and he's not come to change that. So in one sense, it is business as usual; what was ... remains what is. He is preserving tradition and affirming orthodoxy.

But Jesus does add something by saying that the first commandment to love God is *like* the second commandment to love our neighbour. Why is the commandment to love God *like* the commandment to love our neighbour?

We are commanded to love that which is worthy – God is of ultimate worth – therefore, God is worthy of our worship. To use a very contemporary, if we are to 'take a knee', it is to God. We are invited to prayers on our knees as a physical act of submission. The second commandment is like it. Why? Because humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. An early Church Father says it like this: *Whoever loves man is, as the one, who loves God; for man is God's image, wherein God is loved, as a King is honoured in his statue. For this cause, the [second] commandment is said to be like the first.*

But it can be difficult to see God's image in another person, especially as that image and likeness is deformed by sin and selfishness. It would not be right to love that which is violent or greedy or lustful or arrogant in another. But Jesus has come to make it easier for us to discern what we should love in another person.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus pushes the Pharisees who were testing him, to understand something about his identity. The Jewish people had the expectation of a Messiah, and there were certain Bible passages that were generally thought to convey something of the Messiah in terms of personality and purpose. They had the expectation that the Messiah would be a descendant of David. The Messiah would be a warrior. They also generally agreed that Psalm 110 is about the Messiah, so Jesus presses them to explain its meaning: *'How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?'*

The only explanation is that the Messiah is not only a human descendant of David but one who has precedence over David – the Messiah is also the eternal Son of God. Hence, we come to the conclusion that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. So in Christ, the two commandments to love God and to love our neighbour are perfectly alike, since in his human nature he is a perfect image and likeness of God. To love his humanity is to love God. And we are to love that which is Christlike in everyone we see

- and there is no person on earth who does not continue to bear at least part of that image.

There are, of course, the standing theological and sociological arguments about whether people are fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. Are people basically selfless or selfish ... concerned with themselves or concerned for others, trustworthy or conniving? I suspect we have different views, reflecting on our experience of people, and when we might be asked the question. If we have just witnessed a sublime act of compassion or a generous act of kindness, we might answer one way ... if we have observed a terrible crime of passion or a heartless act of unspeakable cruelty, we might answer another way. This 'debate' has raged for centuries. Anglicans tend to take what has been described as an Augustinian view, we are pessimistic about human nature and are surprised by goodness rather than expect it. But this text does not influence that debate. It is actually about something else.

It is about our ability - our readiness and our willingness, to embrace the task of loving our neighbours and extending to them the regard we have for ourselves. [Of course, if we are filled with self-loathing it will be even harder to love our neighbour]. This task is essentially to help in the revealing of the divine image - the likeness of God - by giving worth, by loving and affirming, that which is Christlike in them (and, of course, in us) while forbearing and forgiving the rest. We need, as it were, to study our neighbour's being, to see the texture of their character, to appreciate the struggles and challenges they face, and to discern where they reflect the God who made them. This is not done in a moment. It is an exercise of truthfulness and it might be a revelation if we share what we see of God in them - with them. We are usually reticent about that. We barely get beyond commenting on people's conduct; touching on their character is often a no-go area - but it is often where the divine image is observable.

Of course, we don't affirm unrighteousness, but we do affirm by way of love, righteousness - in ourselves, in our friends, in our spouse, in our family members, in our fellow church members and even, in our enemies outside the Church. We affirm, we do not judge. We embrace, we do not condemn. Next time we hear the two great commandments, may we pause a few moments to consider the magnitude of what we are hearing and the importance of what we are being asked to do - and to be: the loving hearts and hands of God. Amen.

