

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 25th October 2020
The Last Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Merciful God,
teach us to be faithful in change and uncertainty,
that trusting in your word
and obeying your will
we may enter the unfailing joy of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Matthew 22:34-end

When the Pharisees heard that he 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.'

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by 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 David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Sermon

We live quite near to a fish and chip shop. This has always been one of my favourite meals. Very often when I go out into the garden it is evident that the fish and chip shop is in operation. The smell wafts across the garden to remind me of one of my favourite foods, and also to remind me that I must not indulge in such things too often.

It may surprise us to learn how often two things go together and to realise that there's something not quite right when we have one without the other. Think of the things that go together apart from fish and chips:

- Heaven and earth
- Bed and breakfast
- Soap and water
- Left and right
- Lock and key

.....and so on.

Or think of the Frank Sinatra song: Love and marriage, they go together like a horse and carriage; this I tell you, brother; "You can't have one without the other."

In today's Gospel Jesus is again challenged by the religious authorities. They have seen and heard what he has been doing and saying, and once again they try to catch him out. For them the commandments were paramount. They spent a great deal of their time discussing what was most important. Let's see if we can catch him out. Whatever he says we will respond with another question.

But Jesus is having none of it. He knows that to give the answer they expect will ensnare him in their trap. Everyone knew that the most important commandment was to love God. Yet everyone knew that wasn't the complete answer. So Jesus answers not with one commandment, but two: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The first comes from the book of Deuteronomy; "You shall love the Lord your God...." Devout Jews would recite that verse every morning and evening. The second comes from the book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." To avoid any further controversy Jesus makes it clear that you cannot have one without the other.

There is nothing new in the answer Jesus gives. If you look at this incident in Luke's Gospel, it is not Jesus who answers the question; it is Jesus who asks it and a lawyer who gives the correct answer. The lawyer was quite clear what the answer should be. Luke follows this incident with the story of the Good Samaritan in response to the lawyer's question: "And who is my neighbour?" He wants to justify himself and maybe even catch Jesus out. There is no longer any doubt about who is my neighbour.

As Samuel Johnson said: "We are more often required to be reminded than informed." In other words, we know perfectly well what is required of us. But if we are to put these commands into practice we need constantly to be reminded.

What Jesus is doing here is to remind us that we cannot have one without the other. Yet history is full of instances where people have focussed on loving God as they understood it and forgotten that loving God also means loving our neighbour. As it says in the First Epistle of John: "Those who say "I love God" and hate their brothers and sisters are liars.....those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Not only are love of God and love of neighbour inseparable: we can even see them as one and the same thing. Love of neighbour is love of God. For Matthew, we see God in other people. In chapter 25, we read of the end of time when God will gather all things together and Christ will return: "The king will say to those at his right hand 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom.....for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.....' Then the righteous will answer him: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food....and when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or sick and visited you?' And the king will answer them: 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Service to our neighbour is service to Christ, which means service to God, or as the early Christians used to say: "You have seen your brother: you have seen God."

Something we have all had to give much thought to in the past few months is how we can best put loving our neighbour into practice. We have had to explore new ways of loving our neighbour, even to explore ways which we may never have thought of before. The commandment to love our neighbour has taken on a new meaning. Our neighbour may be experiencing life in a way they have never experienced it before - loneliness, isolation, anxiety; separation from friends and family; the loss of familiar things that help to make our lives purposeful and meaningful.

At the same time we have seen examples of "love of neighbour" which go far beyond what normal times might hide from view - the incredible ways in which so many people have given unselfishly and sacrificially to care for others - in our hospitals, our care homes, our service industries, our schools, our homes.

Perhaps never in our lifetime have we witnessed such "love of neighbour" being put into practice. We have all been and can continue to be part of this. In small ways, in meaningful ways, every day to explore small and simple ways in which we can love our neighbour.

Remember the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta - and to help you remember them, buy and use one of our 125 celebration tea towels: "I can do no great things: only small things with great love."

Be assured that in doing small things with great love we are doing our best to love our neighbour in these difficult times - and be assured that we are indeed loving God at the same time.

Amen.