

**Sunday 29 October 2023**

**22nd Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Two Great Commandments**

**Reading for Sermon: Matthew 22. 34 – 46**

Preached by Rev Nic Denny-Dimitriou  
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880 words

In some of our recent Gospel readings, we heard the reports of several individuals and groups having conversations with Jesus in public about religious laws and traditions, sometimes by people asking genuine questions, but mostly by people who wanted to outwit Jesus.

Last week's Gospel reading, with someone questioning Jesus about who we should pay taxes to, was a classic.

*["Give to the Emperor what is due to the Emperor, and to God what is due to God."  
Of course all belongs to God – and we looked at ways we could practically implement our understanding of that.]*

Today's reading tells of another time when religious teachers questioned Jesus. One group had narrow interpretations – great detail in attention to the religious law, with 613 rules – some were listed as Greater Rules and others as Lesser Rules but all of them were designed to ensure they kept the Ten Commandments. *(Expand the concept of a "fence around the Law" – a good idea in theory – but what became of it in practice.)*

Jesus' criticism of this group was about their obsessive attention to 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 good sense of them.

This led to hypocrisy, by ignoring what was intended by the rules, and being so focussed on the rules that there was no room left for love of God.

People also looked for loopholes / ways to avoid keeping some of them, saying they could ignore some of them in order to observe others.

Example: Jesus' healing of a man on the Sabbath: Pharisees fumed, saying it was "work" which should 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 kind of way, understood that God's gift of healing and wholeness was very appropriately dispensed on the Sabbath – the best kind of Godly work there was!

That describes the Pharisees, and perhaps Jesus' comments applied to other groups too. But the faith had many wonderful teachings, despite a dominant group distorting them and failing to live according to them.

These wonderful commands are part of our heritage of faith:

- Holy prayer, "Hear Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord, is One." [English]
  - Hebrew: "Shema Yisrael: Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Achat."
  - It continues with the command to love the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul. It is said every Friday night in the Sabbath Service.
- 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, said: "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 of Jesus the Jew, and he came to fulfil it, to teach it, to expand upon it.

Jesus highlighted that the two Commands are of equal significance. The sequence is important: Love for God is something concrete, 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.

God, who in love chose to save us, is the source of that stream of love which flows on as our love to God and our community of humanity.

Old Testament understanding of neighbour:

Fellow Jews – and it extended to "aliens" in the land. "Remember, you were once aliens in the land of Pharaoh!"

New Testament understanding:

Jesus made clear: All people, not only those with whom we are comfortable. Reference the well-known parable of "The Good Samaritan".

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 our neighbour, to ignore our behaviour towards others, is a distortion of our faith – or even a denial of it.

Hypocrisy is a failure to tie up what we say with what we do – we are all guilty of that to some degree, as we are never perfect, but Jesus is pointing the way for us, making it clear that true religion acknowledges the link between loving God and loving neighbour.

He is providing ethical way to live that avoids obsessive preoccupation with how many commandments we have obeyed and how many we have failed. Instead it is replaced 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.

Concluding...

Therefore there is really only one Commandment: Love. Love God, Love Neighbour.

It is like a coin. A coin that was missing details on one side would not be allowed into circulation, it would be regarded as defective and would be returned to the Mint for melting down and remaking new coins.

Instead a proper coin has two sides.

It is impossible to have one side of the coin without the other.

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