

**Last after Trinity
25 October 2020**

**Readings: Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; I Thessalonians 2: 1-8;
Matthew 22: 34-46**

‘ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus 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.’ These few lines from today’s gospel reading are key to understanding the Christian faith. All we need to add to them are these three words from I John 4: 8, ‘God is love.’ Taken together, I would say that these passages from Matthew and I John should be the watchwords of all Christians both in our actions and in our thought.

How do we carry out these two commandments? How do we love God? When we think of God it is most likely that we first think of God the Father. I don’t know about you, but I find I cannot envision God the Father, for, although we traditionally refer to God as father, we know that God is neither male nor female. We can, however, envision Jesus, since he was one of us. I would therefore say that inasmuch as we love Jesus, we love God. Jesus told us that we love him by reaching out in acts of love to anyone in need. He went so far as to say that whenever we help someone in need we are helping him (Matthew 25: 31-46). Martin Luther once made the point that God needs nothing, whereas all human beings are in need of one kind or another. For this reason love for God must be expressed by love for our neighbours. The writer of I John tells us that ‘those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also’ (I John 4: 20-21).

What are the ramifications of this commandment for us? One which we can easily overlook is the fact that the second commandment speaks of loving our neighbour *as we love ourselves*. In other words, we should, as God’s creatures, love ourselves in that we should respect the bodies and the minds God has given us and refrain from abusing them. As part of God’s good creation we are called to care for ourselves at the same time as we care for others. Keeping the balance between a proper care for ourselves and self-centredness is, of course, a constant struggle. And, as we know, life can present us with situations in which the loving action may well be to give up our lives in order to save the lives of others.

Note that Jesus is telling us to love God, not fear God. This should mean that we serve God and neighbour not because we fear God’s wrath and punishment, but because we know God’s love for us. If we look again at I John we read: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and

whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (I John 4: 18). 'Perfection in love' is, of course, impossible for us in this life. But it is something towards which we are meant to strive. We Christians should reword Proverbs 1: 7 to read 'the love of God is the beginning of wisdom.'

We often think about justice as opposed to love. But the two should be connected. Justice as vengeance is not love, but justice whose aim is correction or transformation is based in love. God's justice is perfect and is intimately rooted in God's love because his justice is always seeking change for the better. God loves us too much to want us to stay as we are, just as a good parent always tries to show their child a better way.

Love also has a way, not just of casting out our fear, but of breaking down barriers. There is a line in Robert Frost's poem, 'Mending Wall,' that goes, 'Something there is that does not like a wall.' The poet thinks this as he and his neighbour are going about their yearly task of repairing a stone wall that runs between their land. The neighbour likes the wall. He quotes the saying, 'Good fences make good neighbours.' But Frost sees this neighbour as 'moving in darkness,' for Frost seems to imply that walls are constantly in need of mending because there is something in the universe that hates these man-made barriers. I would read that as God's opposition to the barriers we like to erect in order to cut ourselves off from other people. Sadly, we in the Church often erect these barriers. We do so whenever we allow a doctrine or dogma to take priority over love of neighbour.

If God is our loving creator, God is, we might say, the perfect parent. Good parents always love their children. And they love all their children equally. So it is with God. And God, unlike so many human parents, never gives up on us his children. Another way of saying this is to think of God as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the shepherd who is always searching for the lost sheep, the shepherd for whom nothing is an impenetrable barrier, not even death.

In short, we are here because of the love of God. Just as love is at the heart of God, so it should be with us. May God help us, day by day, as we seek to know his love and to live it.

Charles Brown