

Last Sunday after Trinity 2020 (Proper 25/30 OT)

We are undoubtedly living during a time of increasing anxiety in this season of pandemic - a totally understandable situation in the circumstances. The isolation and sense of desperation which many are experiencing, together with the sagging mental health of some can perhaps be countered by our readings today. I believe that they give a real sense of the way in which our Faith bears at its heart the sense of connection to the love at the heart of our Faith together with the importance of the Church - the Body of Christ - as a sign of this love. Journeyed faith.

Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is probably the earliest of all Christian documents to have been handed down to us - perhaps written nearly thirty years before Mark's Gospel. Behind the rather formal way in which Paul writes, we have a clear sense of the warmth in which he addresses this community who have found faith in Jesus Christ. Although we know that in some of his letters Paul sometimes becomes angry, or overdoes the rhetoric, here we glimpse the way in which both *he* and *they* have been transformed through the Spirit. They are living out the two great commandments we heard in the Gospel reading. In spite of the beatings Paul endured in his mission to these people, in spite of the hardships and tough times, we sense the new life both he and they continue to experience. What could be more touching than the final part of the reading, when Paul says: *'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.'*

This talks to us of the way in which our belonging to the Body of Christ is a core element of our journey. Ours is a relational faith. We are called into lives of spiritual love both with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and in doing so, overflow this love into the world. However, lest this sounds like a pushover job, let's unpack things a little further.

The Gospel reading today, despite the two great commandments at its heart, gives us a real sense of the negative way in which the Lord's Teaching is viewed by the authorities of the time. Jesus has silenced first the Sadducees and then the Pharisees - both sects within Judaism - who considered themselves the guardians of Torah: God's Law. He has challenged them to the core of their understanding how people were to live their faith. Perhaps even we can be shocked in the way Matthew presents the almost visceral attack Jesus launches on the whole concept of adhering to Biblical law as it was then understood.

The radical nature of the Great Commandments we hear in this passage sees Jesus binding two ancient Biblical strands inextricably together. The *Shema* (*Deuteronomy 6:5*) - a passage Jesus would have said every single day of his life - is united to the scriptural command to *'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* (*Leviticus 19: 18*) Why radical? It is the fact that Jesus gives equal weight to the concept of loving one's neighbour to that of loving God. Matthew has already given us a flavour of this earlier in the Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount, we are enjoined to love (not hate) our enemies. In chapter 19 he has listed 'loving your neighbour

as yourself' in a sequence of commandments to a rich young man who asked how he might earn eternal life.

However, here Jesus distils understanding and interpreting the whole Biblical Law into these two loves. This great teaching calls us to know that loving God with all one's heart and soul (that is, understanding that our whole being and life is bound up in the creative Love of God) is inseparable from our living lives which are active in demonstrating that we acknowledge this same grace in the face of all we meet. Our lives are called to be compassionate and full of grace even to those who are hostile to us. When Jesus tells us that '*on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets,*' we have to go beyond the initial attractive proposition with which he has powerfully concluded his remarks to the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Matthew leaves this section of the Gospel giving us the answer to the question hanging over the identity of Jesus, who has just entered Jerusalem acknowledged by the crowds as the long-awaited Messiah. Regardless of all the posturing made by those in authority to this Nazorean carpenter (who turns their understanding of God upside-down) Jesus is revealed as David's son - yet more than this - as the Son of God - the one who enables those who follow him to know that in 'loving God and neighbour,' they too are drawing closer to enabling the grace of God to work its beauty within their own lives.

So how *do* we go beyond the initial call to love God and neighbour? In understanding the depth of God's love, we must look towards Calvary. It is in the death of Jesus that we can see the gap between what we know about God's love and what the world would be like without it. The cross draws us to the love which we are called to contemplate and imitate. This is not a sentimental love of a surgery kind; it is not a love which sets out to primarily do good (although it ultimately does so.) No! It is a love poured out without thought of cost in the face of hatred, scorn, political ambition, and religious rivalry. It reveals the very heart of our understanding God.

Our Faith is made known in the clarion call that we too must take up our own crosses and follow Jesus, worshipping God in spirit and in truth. We may have to face down persecution, indifference, or the scorn of those we love or even our *own* discouragement, in order to be signs of the Kingdom life made known through the love poured out on the tree. Yet this is the REAL love at the heart of all that exists, and you and I are signs of this love through our baptismal lives as part of the Body of Christ - the Church.

My friends, the great truth Jesus offers us is that above all else each one of us is loved and treasured by God more than we can ever comprehend. In seeking to love as we are loved, we come to know that we are journeyed with every step of our journey. We are never alone.



Shema Yisrael – Hear, O Israel, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one"

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 15-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

I 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.