

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Matthew 22:34-40

It's all about Love

A Google search on the word 'love' threw up 17,800,000,000 results. So perhaps the Beatles were right when they sang, 'All You Need Is Love.' In the Gospel reading Jesus says:

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.'

That's the Great Commandment or the Summary of the Law. A modern paraphrase puts it like this:

Love God, your God, with your whole heart:

love God with all that's in you,

love God with all you've got!

Jesus said that on these two commandments, '*hang* all the law and the prophets. When I think of the word 'hang' I imagine a door hanging on a hinge. The hinge is what enables the door to open. So, the Great Commandment is the hinge that opens up life as God would have us live it. It leads us into the essence of our living.

My Google search, along with the Beatles, would seem to agree. But here's where the popular and the biblical understandings of love part ways. In popular usage love is associated with feelings. But if we wait for a feeling of love before loving we may never get around to it. Loving, as Jesus talks about it, isn't based on emotion. It's about a commitment, a conscious choice, an act of will that involves the whole of us.

'You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, with *all* your mind.' Notice the word *all*. In Greek *holos* – whole, entirely, complete, in every way. That word talks about everything – not some, not even most – but the whole – every part of our being. As Jesus put it, it involves all of our heart, our soul, and our mind. Every feeling, every thought, every passion is to be focused on God... What might this mean?

Love God with all our *heart*... We tend to link the heart with our emotions – but that's not where Jesus is taking us. He remarked, 'Where your treasure is, there is your heart.' What are our treasures? When we're daydreaming, when we're standing at the kitchen sink peeling the potatoes, or the last thing before falling asleep – what do we focus on? Probably on our treasures. It's what fills up our hearts with worry and concern, joy and satisfaction. Our treasures are the centre of our energy and attention. It's our passion – what consumes our heart-felt energy. I wonder, to what extent is God involved in our treasure?

Love God with all our *soul* ... The Jewish idea of 'soul' isn't the same as the Platonic notion in which the human person is split into two: a physical shell with some immortal substance stuck inside it. Rather, we're a whole. 'Soul' means 'a living being' and refers to something like the life force, vitality, life-giving breath of a person. So, it's about loving God with everything – loving with our total life. We hold nothing back from God. Yet I know there are bits of me that I'm reluctant to give over to God – secret ambitions, desires, and even pet hates. How about you?

Love God with all our *mind*... Loving God also involves our intellects and thinking. Being a Christian doesn't mean that we discard our brains. It doesn't mean we stop asking questions. If anything, our faith needs to be brave enough to ask questions. Questions are a stimulus to faith. They keep us exploring and growing. A rabbi was asked, "Why do you rabbis always answer a question with a question?" He replied, "Why shouldn't we?" Loving God with our minds is also about seeking to see life through the lens of divine love. As Paul expresses it: 'putting on the mind of Christ.' I wonder, what place does God have in your questioning and searching for meaning?

This is all about loving God, and God is love. So, to love God is to love 'love' itself. That's why Jesus embodied love in his own living and dying. He loved people who weren't usually loved – street workers, traitors, bent tax collectors, and outcasts from society. He treated with honour and respect people whom others shunned. He even loved his enemies. He says to us, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Love is a verb – or as we were taught as children – 'a doing word'. Love isn't a feeling – it's an action. Our love of God has to result in our love of people. There are two dimensions to our loving. I'm reminded of this when I make the sign of the cross. The vertical speaks of the call to love God and the horizontal to love others. You can't have one without the other, though the love of God comes first, because when we love God, other people (especially those we find difficult, or whom we might call our enemies) become loveable. Like our love of God, we aren't talking about a 'nice feeling' but the most steadfast energy of will. So, when we're commanded to love others, it's not about having nice feelings, but a commitment to see the very best done for them. I find that when I *do* love, even if the other person never responds with love, my feelings catch up with my actions.

Then there's the question, 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus' response... it's anyone in need of our love. When I struggle to love another, I remember that the other person has been made, like me, in the image of God – they reflect something of God. They aren't worthy of my love because of anything they've done or haven't done. They aren't my neighbour because of their quality of life, or moral standards, or religion, or gender, race, or culture. They are my neighbour because God values and treasures them just as God values and treasures me. So, what does it mean for you to love your neighbour as yourself? How do you go about it, especially when the other person is difficult or has been horrible to you?

We learn to love by taking small steps in love. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a listening ear, an embrace, an act of support, a helping hand, a visit. These are little steps toward love. Each step is like a candle burning in the night. It doesn't take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness. When we look back after many small steps of love, we will discover that we've made a long and beautiful journey.

We spend our lifetime growing into love – allowing love to govern how we live. And, of course, we fail to keep the great commandment. But that's one of the beauties of God's call – it's always stretching us – pulling us from where we are to be something more. It's a transformative process that goes on throughout our entire life. It's a commitment that we need to renew daily as we learn again and again to make the choice to love. Loving God and loving our neighbour involves practice, preparation, and perspiration. And it's not something we can do alone. We need the support and encouragement of one another, and, most especially, it requires God's gracious help and love. Then, gradually, we discover that love has become the biggest thing in our lives.

*Alister Hendery
Hastings – 29.10.2023*