

Sermon on Matt 22:34 to end – The Greatest Commandment Sunday Oct 25th 2020

Our passage from Matthew today comes at the end of a whole session of the Pharisees and Sadducees questioning Jesus. They questioned by whose authority He was acting, They tried to trick Him with a question about taxes and then the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection, thought that they would be clever with a question about a woman who married 7 brothers in succession. Finally, they test His orthodoxy when it came to Jewish Theology. Which is the greatest commandment in the law, they asked. Now I know that you all know how many commandments were written on the tablets of stone (although, I also know from a few weeks ago that some of us struggle with naming them all), we all know the 10 commandments, but how many commandments were there in total in the law of Moses? Any idea?

613! So, which of those 613 commandments is the greatest one that they wanted Jesus to identify? And no-one could argue with His answer – Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment, He told them, this comes from Deut 6:5. And the second is like it, Love your neighbour as yourself, from Lev 19: All the law and prophets hang on these two commandments. In other words, if you love God with all your heart and mind and soul and you love others as yourself, all other laws, all other commandments are commentary – they all come back to these 2 in the end.

Now all of this was happening right at the end of Jesus Ministry, just before the Last Supper. At the beginning of Jesus ministry in Matthew He gave the Sermon on the Mount, instructions for living a Christian life and the Sermon on the Mount was summed up by Jesus saying, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you", the Golden Rule. And here at the end of His ministry here on earth, He sums it all up by saying, Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. And we still use these

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words of Jesus as a measure when we come to confession and repentance. Have I loved God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength, have I truly loved my neighbour as myself?

As I said, at the beginning of this questioning of Jesus they had asked Him by whose authority He was acting, and He challenged their question with a question of His own. As John pointed out the other week, Jesus rarely directly answered a question, but often challenged the reasoning of the questioner and used the question as an opportunity to teach. In the second part of our reading, in an indirect way, Jesus comes back to the first question about His authority by asking two more questions: Whose son is the Messiah, well that is easy – everyone knows that the Messiah is the son of David. Ah, says Jesus, in that case why does David call the Messiah his Lord? They are stumped. They can't grasp that the Messiah will be both human and descended humanly from the line of David but also, He will be God and therefore have all authority; and it stops their questions. But they get the message – Jesus is clearly inferring that He is the Messiah and they go away and start plotting to kill Him.

Going back to the first part of our reading and the greatest commandment and that recurring question about just how much we have loved God and our neighbour, clearly no-one ever has or ever can fully obey these commandments. And that brings us back to the very reason that Jesus came in the first place. We all need to be saved from ourselves, from our inability to love in the way that God intended us to because at some point each one of us will choose to put ourselves first, to do what we want. Without God we can't love like this and Jesus came so that we can be forgiven, reconciled with God and made new. When we become Christians, we become a new creation in God. Spiritually united with Him by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit and we

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begin a spiritual journey. That is why we symbolically baptise people near the back of the church, to signify the beginning of that journey. And the point of the journey is to put down more and more of the things of this world, especially the ways of this world, it's values and attitudes and behaviours and to pick up more and more of the ways of Jesus, the ways of the Kingdom of God that we now belong to, more and more of it's values and attitudes and behaviours. We are made new, but like babies and toddlers and children we still have to learn how to walk and talk and grow in our new lives in Jesus. All through our physical, temporal lives as we change and grow, we put some things down and pick other things up. Who still has lots of the things that they owned as a child? Or the clothes they wore as a teenager? I remember taking part in a heated debate in secondary school about corporal punishment. I was the main speaker in favour, and I felt and spoke passionately about it. I was so sure that I was right. Those views could not be further from the views that I hold now. I put down those opinions and views and picked up different ones, which were further refined by my growing in faith. I don't know if any of you have read Pilgrim's Progress. It is a wonderful story of a man's journey of faith through life until he reaches the shores of heaven. And it describes so well the pitfalls, the side-tracks, the times of losing ground as well as the triumphs, the gains, the growth along the way. I know that I bash on about the fruit of the Spirit but in the end this is the only thing we will take in to heaven, the only treasure that we can store up for ourselves, who we have become in Jesus, how loving, joyful, peaceful and peace-making, kind, good, faithful gentle and self-controlled we have grown to be through our journey in faith. It doesn't do us any harm at all to reflect from time to time on how we are doing. Can you see where you have grown in these areas since you came to faith? If you drew a graph of your journey

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what would it look like? What are the areas that really need attention? What are the worldly attitudes, opinions and behaviours that you still need to put down because they don't stand up to the scrutiny of loving God and loving your neighbour? This is not meant to be discouraging, it is rather just to encourage you to ask God to show you how far you have come and to honestly ask Him to bring in to the light those things that still need to change. I challenge you to have that conversation with Him. The greatest commandment might not be something that we can fully achieve in this life, but it is the goal that we have in front of us, the standard to which we aspire and constantly work towards. It should be our greatest desire, to be able more and more to love God with all our hearts and more and more to love others as ourselves, and in doing so to become more like Jesus every day.