

The two Great Commandments – Matthew 22.34-46

Sermon given by Garth Raybould on 23 October 2011

“No-one was able to give him an answer.”

I’m sure we might all be forgiven for being speechless after hearing these words from Jesus. But whereas the Pharisees probably understood very well what he meant but were just stunned by the implications, we just find the words very puzzling. What does all this stuff mean, about David and his Lord? Well, it’s important, so let’s unpack it.

The Jews were expecting a Messiah. One of the common titles of the Messiah was “Son of David”, because they expected the Messiah to be both a descendant of David and a warrior king like David, a person who would lead them in a once-and-for-all military victory over their various enemies. Jesus asks the Pharisees whose son they think the Messiah will be and he knows they will answer “David’s son”. Then Jesus quotes from Psalm 110, which was written by David himself: “The Lord says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’” The first *Lord* is God; the second *Lord* is the Messiah – the Pharisees knew that. But David refers to that second *Lord*, the Messiah, as “*my Lord*”. So, Jesus is saying, David knew that the Messiah would not be a descendant of his. The Messiah is not David’s son, he is David’s Lord. The Messiah is not *Son of David*, he is *Son of God*. See?

Even if you don’t see, these are the implications. First, the Pharisees might not have seen it, but the disciples had already recognised it, and we know now, that Jesus himself was the Messiah, the Son of God. In turn, that means that the answer Jesus gave the Pharisees about the greatest commandment had the authority of God himself behind it. God himself was saying which of his commandments was the greatest, the most important.

We know that in fact Jesus chose two commandments – love God, and love your neighbour, which he gave *almost* equal weight. So there is the second message, which the Pharisees will have recognised – that the Messiah wouldn’t be an earthly conqueror repeating the military victories of David. We know now that Jesus the Messiah established a rule of love, not military might, and he demonstrated that love upon the Cross. The Messiah was not bringing war and military domination but the saving, healing rule of the God who created the whole world, not just one nation. The enemies he would put under his feet were not other nations, but the enemies of love – cruelty, injustice, hatred, selfishness, every form of sinfulness you can think of, and death itself.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment, they might well have been trying to trick him. There were 613 commandments in the Law of Moses and if Jesus chose just one he might have been seen as making all the others less important, which would have been a blasphemy against God. But Jesus was cleverer than they were. He chose those two commandments – love God, love your neighbour.

Love God comes from the book of Deuteronomy: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. *Love your neighbour*, as we have heard, comes from the book of Leviticus: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. But then, Jesus says this: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” That’s a very important sentence. You might remember that in the old ASB Communion service the leader would say “There is no other commandment greater than these,” and we would all say, “Amen. Lord have mercy.” Now, the leader says, “There is no other commandment greater than these. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” *Then* we say “Amen. Lord have mercy.” What Jesus is saying is not that the other laws are less important, but that they derive their importance from these two commandments. To say that the other laws “hang” on them is actually a technical term meaning that they depend on them; they are not, as one commentator puts it just “footnotes” to the two great commandments.

That means two things. In the story, it means the Pharisees can't accuse Jesus of making the other laws less important. To us, it means that if we have any doubts about how we apply the laws given to Moses in our world today, we look to those two great commandments for guidance. There are some theologians who call this situationalism, that is, the view that our Christian conduct should be to do the most loving thing in a given situation. They say that rather than that, we should apply the commandments of the law within the context of our obligation to love God and man. See the difference? Nor me. No doubt there are better theologians among you who will point out my error later, but they seem to me to be the same thing. It all comes down to loving God and loving man.

Well, we are familiar with all of that. We recite the two great commandments every week. We read about love throughout the gospels and the epistles. We know that Jesus taught love, lived a life of love and died a death of love. The question is, how much notice do we take in our everyday lives? How closely do we try to follow Jesus' example? Are we any different from people who don't call themselves Christians?

Jesus reminds us to love God with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind, and in some versions there's a fourth way – with all our strength. That's a way of saying we should love with our whole being, in every aspect of our lives. But it also means loving in those four different ways - emotionally, spiritually, practically and in our thinking. Yet somehow that last one – thinking – often seems to get forgotten. It means interpreting and applying God's laws in the light of the modern knowledge and understanding *that he has given us*, his continuing revelation. There are some ways in which we let our prejudices rule our minds, so that when we see lifestyles we don't personally favour we condemn them on the basis of ancient rules. Very few people today would suggest that for religious reasons we shouldn't eat pork or shellfish, yet we still judge some personal relationships on the basis of 3000-year-old ideas of human sexuality, for example. Jesus himself pointed out that we have moved on from some of the old rules, like "an eye for an eye" – moved on, notice, not retreated – because we have an even better, more understanding and compassionate, way of living.

I think this is what God meant when he said through the words of Jeremiah the prophet, "I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts." We don't have to remember all of the 613 laws given to Moses or the hundreds of others piled on since – we simply need to let our actions be guided by love for God and love for our neighbour.

I said that the two great commandments had *almost* equal weight. That's because Jesus clearly placed them first and second, but in practice our love for God is made manifest by our love for other people – all people. We can only truly love our neighbours as ourselves through the power of our loving relationship with God himself, not through our own power. We can't love God and not love one of his people. People are made in God's image – this is what it means, that people are God's creation and worthy of the same honour and respect. Hard, yes, but doable in God's power.

In the same way that the Messiah conquers the world by love, not might, so it should be with us as individuals. Jesus said "Love your enemies." Living the life of Christ means not trying to get one over on those who oppose us, but reaching out to them to work in co-operation for God's kingdom. Jesus said "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacemakers aren't third parties who come in to broker deals between disputing parties – they're not like ACAS. Peacemakers are the disputers themselves – the ones who make the first move to reach out and build bridges, make peace.

It's sometimes said that you can love people without liking them. I don't know. But you can't love someone and routinely treat them with disdain, disrespect, indifference, bitterness, suspicion, rejection, distrust. Even if we didn't have all the overt violence and abuse that's in the world there are myriad small ways like this of not loving people. Loving people means making them feel better about themselves, making them feel worthy, building them up. We say at the Peace, let us pursue all that *builds up* our common life.

So let's always give thanks for the love that binds us as Christians, and strive to let our love shine

out from this church and be seen and felt by those in the community around us. Let our hearts and minds be constantly refreshed by God's spirit to love him and all his people.

Last night I was thinking about how to round off this talk. Then I found this on Facebook. Nina was doing prayers with Esther at bedtime. She said "What do you want to say thank you for?" Esther said "Love."

Out of the mouths of babes.