

**SERMON AT YORK: 24/10/99: GEOFF CHADWICK: 22ND SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST OS 30: MTT 22:34-46:
“THE TWO GREAT COMMANDMENTS”**

As I mentioned last week, we are reading a part of Matthew’s Gospel where the hostility towards Jesus is beginning to mount. Last week we had the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians mounting up against Jesus. Today, the Scribes (teachers of the Law), or Lawyers begin to mount their challenge.

Learning to be a scribe or lawyer was not an easy matter. It meant a close devotion to understanding the law books of the bible as well as the extra “common” and religious laws that had developed over the centuries. Lawyers were considered learned people and their opinions on matters legal were to be respected. So the trap laid before Jesus is one of accreditation. “Can this popular upstart really know the law as well as we do? After all he didn’t go to the finest law schools in the land like we did!” Jesus then gets asked a fundamental question which is meant to bamboozle him, and show his supposed ignorance of important matters like the law: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Mtt 22:36, NRSV). Now, one would expect a slow even long or maybe confused answer. Perhaps it’s the preamble to the constitution to the state of Israel, maybe it’s the health act of 1500BC forbidding the eating of certain foods and demanding proper cleaning procedures for pots and pans. Maybe it’s the principle of Jubilee where all debts would be wiped out, slaves returned home and property returned every 50 years (a nice idea of a law that one – but far too difficult to enforce). What law could it be?

Jesus answers quickly and decisively.

“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.” (Mtt 22:37-40, NRSV).

These laws are quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Deuteronomy 6:5 reads: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”(NRSV) and comes within the second edition of the giving of the law in the Old Testament. (There are two stories of Moses receiving the law, one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy).

Leviticus 19:18 reads: “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” (NRSV).

Jesus’ answer not only proves his excellent knowledge; it also extracts two of the most profound statements out of the mass of religious and civil law that existed. You can almost hear Jesus saying “In the midst of all the minor technicalities of the law, the basic principle is this: love of God, neighbour and self.” I will put it another way. If you love your neighbour you will not murder them or steal from them or covet their goods or lie against them.

But loving neighbour is not enough. From Jesus’ perspective you cannot love your neighbour without being able to love God and yourself first.

One of the greatest misunderstandings that has crept into Christian thought is the equating of self-sacrifice with self-hate. This has led to a sort of ‘door-mat’ theology where people think it is Christian to be walked all over. Somehow it is seen to be loving to allow others to take advantage of you. If you look at the character of Jesus this is anything but true. In today’s encounter you will note that Jesus is in control and is not walked over. Jesus makes the point that we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves. I don’t think he meant we should be deficient in our self-love so that our love for others would also be deficient. There is an assumption here that we should love ourselves.

This of course is not always easy. We know our own inner motivations, flaws, foibles and failures better than anyone else. But we also do know our own skills talents, desires and dreams better than anyone else. God wants us to know ourselves well and in that knowing we will be able to “love our neighbours as ourselves.”

It is interesting to note that Jesus places loving God and loving neighbour alongside each other... “...*a second is like it.*” The Greek here is very interesting. The word for *like* is *homia*, which also means *resemble*. We could say that the two great commandments are meant to resemble with one another so that Love of God, love of neighbour and love of self are seen as a unity.

This seems a far cry from law. How often we have know laws to be a divisive, or obstructive or restrictive. How often we equate law with something destructive of the creative human soul. Yet law can be enabling. Law can point us to capacities that we do have. Law can be “Thou shalt” rather than “Thou shalt not.”

The matter of love is not a simple one either. The word in this passage is *agape* which refers to the type of love that loves without expectation of return. How easily we debase this form of love to “cupboard love” or “conditional love”. The command is not easy. We are called not simply to like our neighbour or even to tolerate our neighbour but to love them. This love may mean toleration or liking but it may also mean correction, conflict resolution, repentance and forgiveness. We are challenged to make our human love *resemble* divine love. Being created in the image of God means that we do have the capacity to transcend all the false human imitations of love and become people of *agape*.

Jesu said:

“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.” (Mtt 22:37-40, NRSV).

This is more than a rule of life. This is an invitation into a life of profound transformation. It is an invitation into life itself; where law becomes freedom, selfishness becomes self-less-ness and love becomes gift.

The lord be with you.

And also with you.