

Sunday Between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> October [30]

Matthew 22:34-46

Dr. Robert Seizer, in his book *Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery* tells this story. He has just removed a tumour from a young woman's face, but sadly had to cut a facial nerve in the process leaving her mouth permanently distorted. This is what he says:

" Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks: "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes" I say, "it will be. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it" he says, " It is kind of cute". All at once I know who he is.

I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with God. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate hers, to show that their kiss still works."

What a Christ-like love that husband showed to his wife, all accepting, unconditional. And love is the subject of our Gospel reading this morning.

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus a question:

Teacher which commandment in the law is the greatest?

And Jesus replied: "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind.

The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

There is no other commandments greater than these"

People sometimes think that Jesus invented these two commandments, so synonymous with Christ have they become, but of course he didn't. You can find them in the Old Testament.

The first is found in the book of Deuteronomy "Hear O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength." and the second is found in the book of Leviticus "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:18) Jesus' genius was in linking the two commandments together.

Interestingly the Jews had 613 different commandments in the Old Testament– most of which were "dos and don'ts". These two commandments, which Jesus chose as the greatest have to do with the heart – to do with our attitude to God and to our neighbour. You can't legislate for love. You can't enforce the commandment to love in a Court of Law –as you can the commandment not to murder or to steal.

Love is not quantifiable, it has to do with grace – it is something special. The Bible describes the love of God as Agape. God's Agape Love is a love that loves regardless of how the person responds. It is something that you cannot earn. It is freely given and does not depend on the worthiness of the recipient.

Of course, of the 613 laws in the Old Testament many were listed with their punishments. Leviticus is full of them and some of them are quite fascinating, showing us how the world

was in that period of history by describing the specific laws that have all been borne out of the original 10 commandments. Some examples of these are:

When you harvest your land, don't harvest right up to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings from the harvest. Don't strip your vineyards bare or go back to gather the fallen grapes, leave them for the poor and the foreigner. Don't plant your field with two types of seed. Don't wear clothes woven with two types of material. All of these laws also came with a punishment which most of the time was driving out of the promised land for those responsible otherwise the land would be taken away from the whole of the Jewish nation.

But Jesus' top commandments boil all of these laws down not just to the 10 commandments but further still down to 2 types of love – love for God and love for one's neighbour.

It can be difficult to see love as an essential part of the Christian gospel especially if you think of "love" as soppy and sentimental and just for sensitive people. But it isn't.

Love can be very strong in fact it can be where our greatest strength is viewed. Love caused Jesus to die on the Cross in our place – for our sins, because there was no other way for us to be reconciled to God.

St. Paul recognised the responsibility to love when he said: "Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law". (Rom 8:10b)

Few people will be argued into the Kingdom of heaven – though doubtless some will, but mostly trying to talk to people about faith and convince them of the gospel is far less effective than living the gospel. Far more likely is that many have and will come to know Jesus in a personal way, by Christians showing the love of God in their lives.

Jesus, it seems, is not looking at achievement but at attitude. He is not looking at the deeds themselves and how perfectly executed our tasks are but he is looking for the motivation behind those acts.

Jesus is not interested in sterile religion – in keeping the rules - but rather in a living relationship. He wants us to have a lively relationship with our heavenly Father and if we are too concerned with keeping every rule in Leviticus we miss out living the faith.

If we get the relationship between ourselves and God right, then that is going to affect our relationships with our fellow human beings. It just has to! And by taking care of those relationships with those around us whose lives we can affect, we strengthen our relationship with God who loves us all.

St John put it forcefully in his first letter:

Dear friends, since God has loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.