

God, help my words to be loving and true, and help those that listens to disregard what is not. Amen.

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

...

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your mind,
and with all your strength.”

When asked which commandment was first of all this prayer was the response Jesus gave. This prayer, known as the Shema, is the central prayer of the Jewish tradition. A week after the deadliest anti-Semitic terror attack in US history, let us never again forget that Jesus was Jewish. And that Jesus, and the earliest Jewish Christians, did not turn their backs on Judaism in order to become Christian. Let us, at this time, not turn our backs on our Jewish brothers and sisters.

I want to take a moment of silence to remember the 11 victims of the the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last week. In spending a moment in silence let us remember that history matters: the stories of God’s people matter, remembrance matters. We must confess of the anti-Semitism that has marred the history of the Christian tradition: how it has infested how people treat and kill others, how it shapes our remembrance of history, and how it influences how we read the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

I will read the names of each of the victims, and then we will have a moment of silence.

Joyce Fienberg
Rich Gottfried
Rose Mallinger

Jerry Rabinowitz
Cecil Rosenthal
David Rosenthal
Bernice Simon
Sylvian Simon
Daniel Stein
Melvin Wax
Irving Younger

...

May their memory be a witness and a call to God's love. *Amen.*

Our readings today from Hebrews 9 and Mark 12 seem at first glance to be contradictory. On the one hand, Hebrews draws on the metaphor of the practices of the Jerusalem temple to make sense of how Christ connects us, or reconnects us, to God. On the other hand, Mark 12 draws into question the practices of the temple: the joint commands to love God and love neighbour are much more important than all the burnt-offerings and sacrifices.

This tension requires some reflection.

Our reading today from Mark continues the blistering critique that runs through the entirety of Mark 12. Jesus lays out a critique of the established religious system of first century Israel, centred in the Jerusalem temple. This chapter, one of my favourites in all of Scripture, narrates the final encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Mark 12 crystallises how we are meant to understand the journey of Jesus to the cross.

When Jesus is asked which commandment is first of all his reply is the great Jewish prayer, the Shema. His response is the command to love: to

love God with fullness, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. The Scribes, the keepers of the Jewish law, recognise that these commands are central to their own tradition. They suggest that the two commands to love, that Jesus recalls us to, are more important than all the burnt-offerings and sacrifices offered in the temple.

It seems that we should not read Jesus' crucifixion simply as an atoning sacrifice, in continuity with the temple system. Rather, Jesus' death and resurrection might also be understood as a surprising outpouring of God's love.

The Scribes commend Jesus for his teaching.

But as our reading goes on Jesus turns on the Scribes:

“Beware the Scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, ... and to have the best seats in the synagogues ... They devour widows' houses ... They will receive the greater condemnation.”

The Scribes agree with Jesus that the command to love should be first and foremost. And yet, there is still deep disagreement. There is still condemnation for the Scribes.

Mindful of the remembrance with which we began this sermon, we cannot repeat the failings of past Christian interpreters, that have seen in Jesus' critique of Jewish leaders and the temple a justification for anti-Semitism. This ancient argument is not primarily about Jesus and Judaism. Jesus' critique flows out of the deep well of Love that runs through the Jewish tradition. And as our tradition has grown out of Jesus' teaching, we might hear Christ's word of condemnation afresh to us - out of our own tradition.

This ancient argument is all too contemporary: Christians also agree that love should be our primary drive, and yet --

We are confronted by events such as the shooting we have remembered today--

We are confronted by the acknowledgement of our Church's complicity in colonisation, and injustice towards first peoples--

We are confronted by those made vulnerable by the Church's treatment, because of the colour of their skin, or their place in society, or their gender, or their sexuality--

Christians on each side of these confrontations have defended their positions as in some way loving.

These confrontations challenge our very commitment to love. They prompt the question -- and, at least for me, also an early 90s pop classic: "what is love?"

Here our reading from Hebrews is not so much a contradiction, but a clarification.

The command to love does not, after all, supercede the temple. Rather, love relocates the meeting point between humanity and God. If we want to know what the shape of love is, what love really looks like, then we have to go outside the temple. We have to go outside of the city, to the place where bodies are condemned and left to die.

By pointing, in visceral terms, to the death of Christ on the cross, and the outpouring of his blood, Hebrews puts into stark terms what love means.

Hebrews offers us a way forward: If you want to know what the shape of love is. If you want to know about the love that is more important than all the sacrifices in the temple. Then you have to look at the cross, at the blood of Christ, which is so much more than the blood of animals in the temple.

On the cross Jesus dies an unremarkable death. Jesus dies outside the temple, among the countless victims of empire, oppression, political, economic, and religious violence.

And yet what makes this death remarkable, what marks it as the centrepiece of history, is that in this unremarkable death the fullness of God dwelled. The crucifixion of Christ becomes the new meeting point between God and the world - the new Holy Place. The cross establishes the reign and shape of God's love. A reign of love that extends mercy to the vulnerable by standing in their place. A reign of love that proclaims justice, through God's solidarity with the suffering.

This is more important than all the sacrifices in the temple. All the inherited practices of religion. This is test of love: do you stand with the victims and the vulnerable, showing mercy, and proclaiming justice? Do you speak the word of truth, the word of condemnation, onto religious and political leaders that oppress, and inflict violence?

The proclamation of the Word of God we hear in today's readings may not sound like good news to a Church that acknowledges its complicity in colonisation, a Church that recognises its institutional failing to protect children from abuse, a Church that remembers a history of anti-Semitism, a Church that admits its poor treatment of people on the basis of gender or sexuality ... To such a fragile and broken Church this may not sound like good news.

But to a Church that sees the cross-shaped love of God bending the arc of history towards justice, enfolding our lives in mercy. To a Church that sees that our connection to God comes through the spilled blood of Christ, that purifies our dead works and offers us a way back. To a Church that hears the Word of God's judgement falling upon it, and reforms its practices and institutions into a tapestry of justice and mercy. To a Church that sees on

the cross the dwelling place of God, alongside the victims of religious and political power -- This is Good News indeed.

Christ offers us a way back. Christ shows us the crossed-shape love must take: pursue justice for the victim, pursue mercy for the vulnerable. This is more important than all the practices that reinforce religious institutions.

This is the shape of God's love.

Amen.

Blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you
and give you peace.

God in peace,
Finding life in the love of the vulnerable
Love and serve the Lord
In the name of Christ
Amen.