

**Manningham Uniting Church**

**11 February 2024**

**Theme: THE WAY OF LOVE: Love God and Love Neighbour**

**Readings: Psalm 50, Romans 12:1-10, Mark 9:2-9**

Thank you Swee Ann for the our theme for today.

Today there are going to be bits of philosophy, ethics and theology to frame this theme *The Way of Love: Love God und Love Neighbour* from my point of view.

So, there is quite a risk today my offerings may land like earnest minister sermonese.

There is a person in Family@ |0 services who is prone to yell out – “too complicated”!

This is a complicated warning - hopefully there may be the light of wisdom in the tunnel ahead - at the very least a warning of philosophical trains coming our way!

Otherwise, you have my permission to look on your phone as a distraction! If you have not brought your phone to the service - sorry can't help you today! Your only solace is to blame Swee Ann for the choice of our theme this year!

**PowerPoint:** To set the tone - The History of Religion (Pt 1 The Dawn of Humanity)

### **Setting the Scene**

As we noted earlier from The History of Religion: Part One: The Dawn of Humanity - Loving God and Loving Neighbour often can feel anything but the way of love.

**Video:** The Lowdown (Godfather) - about someone being asked to be a godfather.

Call me a religious person and images of an intolerant and rigid person come to mind. Call me a spiritual person and images of an odd maybe intriguing person come to mind.

### **Illustration:**

#### **Descartes - what can you know for certain?**

*It is not controversial to suggest one of the philosophical fathers of our age arguably is Rene Descartes . A 17<sup>th</sup> Century French thinker who endeavoured to prove what we can know for certain. He posited a range of doubts to our knowledge and concluded that what we could know for certain was summed up in the phrase **I think therefore I am**. I know for sure that I know, even if I am not sure what I know!*

**Thinkers from Hume, Kant to Wittgenstein** contested and developed this further.

We can thank this Enlightenment heritage in that it freed us from what we would now call superstition - which also redefines or denies easy access to faith knowledge.

When we say we rely on the Scriptures, we rely on our experience of God, we rely on the bonds of Christian community - our metaphysical foundations are up for grabs. Now knowledge for making sense of our world is based on, at times, a weird marriage of evidence and/or personal preference not metaphysic whimsy – which is mainly not bad thing.

This Enlightenment and its Post Enlightenment heritage leaves us with some challenges if we wish to live the *Way of Love as Loving God and Loving Neighbour*.

### **The Shadow of Dualism**

It is not all upside – Descartes' *I think therefore I am*, in offering proof of certainty infers or relies on body and mind as different states of being or even substance. It's hard to avoid this becoming a dualism or parallel or even competitive realities. Some might say - me being one – that it reflects our Catholic even Orthodox underpinnings, where your body and soul are different but connected realities. It's mainly sourced from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century neo-Platonic philosophical views of Plontinus. A philosophical framework that advocates for dualisms and hierarchies shaped from certain parts of Greek and Latin philosophical traditions. A philosophy framework where reality has different levels like Plato's cave parable. We're stuck in a cave that only allows us glimpses out of it to what's real and valuable - we are not able to see the whole or even the most important parts of reality. We need philosophers - Roman Catholic clergy?!? - to see the different levels to affirm what is preferred - life is getting to a higher level of behaviour and outlook. We might be surprised how many neo-Platonic views we assume are Christian.

In the following list are just some examples of Christian distinctions where the former is at best tolerated and more often thought of as less than good while the latter is mostly good.

- Material and Spiritual ,
- Poverty and Wealth
- Natural and Supernatural
- Secular and Sacred
- World and Church
- Body and Soul
- Desire and Holiness
- Spiritual and Religious
- Christians and Clergy
- Hell and Heaven
- Individual and Community
- Creation and God

Dualities are a common way of trying to make sense of our world - this isn't to say they're not helpful metaphors but less than helpful when pushed as certainties. Some may argue that such dualities are based in the Hebrew and Greek worlds of the Scriptures - to be fair there is much in these worlds that can be read that way. At best I would suggest this is a deficient view of how the Judeo-Christian traditions relied on their Hebrew and Greek influences, but mostly you would be wrong.

When Jesus says the first commandment and a second is like it - he is talking **Hebraic Parallelism** - the first commandment and the second is not another but is like it. Presenting the same idea in another way - Love God and Love Neighbour is the first of all commandments - love God is the first line and love neighbour is the second line.

Hebraic parallelism declares that to love God pretty much *is* loving your neighbour – to love your neighbour pretty much *is* loving God.

*Love God and Love Neighbour* - the meaning is in the bad grammar: "*There is no other commandment - not commandments - greater than these.* Jesus is not making a summary of the commandments as is often casually said. Where two halves make a whole, where we can divide what is God and neighbour stuff. Jesus is not saying *either* love God or love neighbour - an un-Hebraic dualism. Nor is he saying love both God *and* neighbour - an unhelpful un-Hebraic cliché statement of the obvious - it is in unpacking all this that the true way of love lies. For we know that working this out is not always straightforward or easily agreed.

The better theological, ethical and philosophical approach is to pose - what is the best vantage point in this occasion so to best see the whole - the way of love? In this situation is it best to start the focus on *loving neighbour so to love God* or is it best to start the focus on *loving God so to love your neighbour*.

To coin a contemporary idiom loving God and loving Neighbour is a fluid faith thing. This is the Hebraic parallelism way of love that Jesus lived, died and offers to all. Because Hebraic tradition knows that there is God and we are not God - love of God and love of Neighbour protects us from idolatry.

One cannot underestimate how Hebraic the NT is at every point where love of God flows seamlessly into love of another and vice a versa.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship... **naturally concluding with** to love one another with mutual affection.* (Romans 12:1 & 10).

## **Scandal of Limits of God love - neighbour love - no limits.**

Of course this is hard, challenging and radical to us - so how is this fluid type 'Love God - Love Neighbour' faith thing then to work out?

The biggest scandal and challenge to those who would be followers of the God of Jesus in the Hebraic Scriptures, the New Testament, etc is the limits of our devotion.

- How much love of God is enough - is there a limit? Maybe not!
- How much love of neighbour is enough - is there a limit? Maybe not!
- Oh no! Is God coming after our tax cuts? Surely not!

## **The Way of Love: Jesus**

**So is Jesus affirming a duality when he suggests love God and love Neighbour?**

*"Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, "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." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 12:28-31)*

Is Jesus setting up a pecking order where it is better to love God than to love your neighbour? Love God and do your best to Love neighbour if you can!

**Video:** The Lowdown (Godmother) - about someone being asked to be a Godmother.

Is the true measure of loving God being religious doing church related deeds? May I suggest that would be missing the key insight Jesus offers as a Jewish person.

The Hebraic tradition - in contrast to much of, but not all, Greek philosophy including the Enlightenment philosophy of Descartes - is almost religiously holistic. When it makes distinctions, it is not saying this is part of the story but a way of seeing the whole story. Not so much either/or which naturally leads to unhelpful dualisms. Nor both/and which can sound vacuous which says it all but means not much – like Donald Trump being asked for his favourite verse of the Bible and replying “all of it”!

Rather the Hebraic tradition looks for what is the best starting vantage point on this occasion, so how to best see the whole. What's important is the whole not the part - a journey into the whole from a point.

Whatever you make of the Trinitarian tradition it's a version of this Hebraic tradition. It offers a way into the whole life of God starting with the life of Jesus.

**Where to Start? Hebraic Parallelism**

As you may be aware there is a literary device that helps us grasp this Hebraic view. When you read the psalms - the second line of a couplet represents some insight in another way, concept, simile, metaphor, etc - this is called *Hebraic Parallelism*. When you read the psalms each line of verse is like the flipside of the same coin.

When Jesus is asked which is the *first* commandment - *not* which commandments are first - he replies the first is love God etc and the second is love neighbour. They form a Hebraic parallelism as one commandment even though it sounds to our ears like Jesus cheated - was asked for his favourite commandment and offered two!

In Matthew this is made in even more explicit - *And a second is like it* (Matthew 22.39) - one commandment, one verse, two lines, one point.

The way of love in Jesus is that love God, love Neighbour should be all consuming, but we are constantly aware that we fall short wanting and needing to place limits.

**Video:** The Lowdown (Egg Donor)

Our reflections on Love God - Love Neighbour are naturally drawn to noting the limits of our capacities - are we really prepared to give another my eggs? Should we be willing to let another have my eggs? Maybe but often/mostly we do not!

Jesus promises that God will not hold it against us when we do not love God love neighbour as we should. For we all need Jesus' way of love even, and especially when we fail God and each other. So out of thanks then, we do not give up the hope of Loving God, Loving Neighbour. This is different to just being ordered to do or perform better. The Jesus way does not rely on us doing better but to know how much forgiveness we need and are freely offered by the God of Jesus to retain faith in the way of love.

### **Conclusion: The Way of Love and Many Theological Fluid Hebraic Parallelisms**

The Hebraic way of love that the God of Jesus offers, is that loving God and loving neighbour is pretty much the same thing.

More theological fluid Hebraic Parallelisms

- If the Material is the Spiritual - the Spiritual is the Material
- If Poverty is Wealth - Wealth is Poverty, be you capitalist or socialist
- World and Church - Church is within the World
- Natural and Supernatural - for me that is fake news
- If the Secular is Sacred - the Sacred is Secular

- If the Body is Soul - so the Soul is the Body
- If Desire is Holiness - so Holiness is Desire
- If the Spiritual is Religious - then Religiosity is Spiritual
- Christians and Clergy- Christians are the 'Priesthood of all believers'
- Individual and Community - I am known therefore I am (African Proverb)
- Hell and Heaven - we are Saints and Sinners

So the Trinitarian conundrum is not saying Father Son and Spirit are part of God – but that through each we see the whole – and as such is a version of the Hebraic tradition.

Love God Love Neighbour is the same path with different scenery! Love God Love Neighbour is the way of love because it has forgiveness at its heart.

In this first commandment we find the way of love as religious, spiritual, churchy 'do gooders' figuring out how to give our eggs away to each other and those around us.

Not as performance - the way of love is the way of receiving and offering forgiveness. Of course, Loving God and Loving Neighbour is tricky - a myriad of conundrums to ponder - let us ponder and share our wisdom together in the coming year.