

REFLECTION Love is all we need

Jesus was a great storyteller. You only have to read the accounts in the Gospels describing the crowds who followed Jesus. The people walked out of the towns and villages, sometimes quite long distances, just to hear him speak. Witness the thousands who became part of the “Jesus feeds the 5000” story.

But Jesus was not only a charismatic storyteller, he was also well versed in Jewish law. Part of the friction between Jesus and the Pharisees was because they recognised his command of Jewish law and were constantly trying to catch him out, to discredit him. There are times in the Gospel accounts in which Jesus deliberately breaks the “law” because he considers there is a greater good in doing so - healing on the Sabbath, allowing his disciples to pick grain, touching the unclean lepers, disregarding ritual handwashing, associating with sinners and outcasts.

Rev Dr Zina Jaque says this about the question posed in today’s reading, *A legal expert from among the Pharisees asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest (verse 36). The question is a test, but it is not a hard one. Jesus’s answer—love God with everything you have, and love your neighbour as yourself—would have found immediate recognition from everyone within earshot.*

The teacher of the Law thinks he is going to catch Jesus out with his question about the greatest command. Jesus answers simply by reciting the Shema, a prayer that devout Jews recite every morning and night, taken straight from the Book of Deuteronomy 6:5)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. Therefore, you shall love the LORD your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

The second part of the answer

You must love your neighbour as yourself

is lifted from Leviticus (19:18).

What might have raised some eyebrows is that Jesus puts both of these commands on an equal footing. The second is just like the first: our love of neighbour mirrors our love of God. Jesus, mind you, was not asked for two great laws, but he gave two as one. The entire will of God and purpose of our life is to love God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves.

So Jesus is not introducing a new idea. He is stating what everyone already knows. And that is precisely the problem. The Pharisees know the answer. Jesus knows they know. The crowd knows. There is no debate about the content of the commandment. The failure has never been about the information. The failure is always somewhere between the knowing and the doing, in the space where we understand perfectly what love requires and find ourselves, quietly and repeatedly, unable to deliver it.

In this radical linking of love of God with love of neighbour and self as the greatest commandment, Jesus makes all other laws about purity, cleanliness, rituals, sacrifices, etc. secondary. In other words, he has just cut the privileged status out from under the feet of the religious leaders whose position depends on these secondary laws. No wonder they saw Jesus as a threat to the status quo.

Matthew says,

Love God. Love your neighbour.

but then he adds,

...on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets

The central tenets of love of God and love of neighbour stand here next to one another.

This recalls what Matthew said in 7:12,

*Therefore all that you want people to do for you, do likewise for them;
for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

Jesus, according to Matthew, has come not to set aside the Law and the Prophets but to uphold them, to fulfil them, to make sure they are understood and observed properly.

Way back in the Book of Deuteronomy, beyond the 10 commandments, the Hebrew people are given two laws upon which the whole of the rest of Jewish Law is built..

*Love God with the whole of your being - and love your
neighbour as you love yourself.*

If anyone lives their life in accord with these two - they will automatically keep the whole of the rest of the Law.

We can often lose sight of the truth - or find ourselves caught up in worrying about details of belief and forget that before all else we are called to love - to love God and to love our neighbour - and where such a commitment is made - the rest almost always follows naturally.

With Jesus, love is everything. Not only does he identify love of neighbour with our love of ourselves and of God; he makes it quite clear that love is serving others, even laying down our lives for them.

As St Louis theologian John Kavanaugh says,

Anyone who thinks that love is an easy path should consult the "more excellent way" of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

What is love? Love is patience. It is kindness. It is not jealous or conceited, rude or selfish. It does not take offense, nor is it resentful. It is always ready to trust, to excuse, and to endure whatever comes.

But having confounded the Pharisees, Jesus is not finished.

Now he turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question of his own:

Whose son is the Messiah?

They answer correctly: *The Son of David.*

Then Jesus presses: How is it that David himself, in Psalm 110, calls the Messiah "Lord"? If the Messiah is David's descendant, why does David subordinate himself to the one who comes after him? The Pharisees go silent. They have no answer.

But look at what Jesus has just done.

He hasn't changed the subject. He has illustrated it.

David, the king, the man from whose line the Messiah would come, looked at his own descendant and said: "My Lord." He bent the knee to someone he could have claimed superiority over. He oriented his will toward the greatness of another rather than protecting his own precedence.

David demonstrated the humility that makes love possible. And the Pharisees, who know the commandment perfectly, cannot answer the question because the question is asking them to do the same thing David did: to subordinate themselves to someone they did not expect to be above them. They cannot do it. Not because they don't know the commandment. But because they have no concept of humility!

Israel longed for the Messiah to come. When the Messiah came, God would put all Israel's enemies under his feet. The Messiah would bring the glory of God. They all knew that. But they have just seen— suddenly known with a new and startling clarity— that the glory of God... is that all people are neighbours! The glory of God is that we love God by loving our neighbour as ourselves! We uphold all people! There are none who are excluded, none who are made victims! None who are "the judged!"

To love God is to love our neighbour.

It would seem that too many people in our modern world have forgotten this basic truth.

This week I read an excellent article by Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of *The Australian*. It was headed “Revive faith and rescue the West from nihilistic anarchy.

Looking at the French rioters, he noted,

the young people especially lack faith in their country and faith in God. France is now one of the world's most left wing and secular nations. A tiny proportion go to church regularly. A minority claim any Christian affiliation. A majority are atheist, while education is dominated by ideological leftism.

Does this sound like anywhere else you know?

Fortunately, Australia is like, but a little less intense and not quite so far down the track as France.

Sheridan nominates two books offering useful correctives.

One is Tony Abbott's “Australia, a history”, which Sheridan sees as celebrating the extraordinary achievement in Australian nationhood. His book is about building and rebuilding a culture.

The other book is “Converts” by Melanie McDonagh. It charts a recent period, more or less suppressed in official and semi-official remembering of the 20th century, in which Catholic Christianity experienced astonishing success in spreading its faith. Many of the converts she lists were not converted from another branch of Christianity but from unbelief – GK Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Oscar Wilde, Muriel Spark (author of the Prime of Miss Jean Brodie) and Siegfried Sassoon, the famous war poet. This renaissance was not only for intellectuals. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary folk converted or returned to the faith of their childhood. A golden age, but it lost momentum in Britain in the mid-1960s. And Australia pretty much followed the same path.

Our world is not the same as it was when we were growing up.

We almost have to start all over again.

Our starting point is very simple

Love God. Love our neighbour

To love God is to love our neighbour.

AMEN