

Sunday 25 October 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer:

God of creation,
you have made us to be nourished in your care,
and you test us so that we will turn again and again
toward your gifts.
Show us how to love our neighbours and ourselves,
and teach us to delight in your law
so that we will know the way of gratitude and thanksgiving.
In the name of Christ Jesus, our Saviour, we pray. Amen.

(FOW Worship)

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Matthew 22:34-46

The Great Commandment

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

(English Standard Version Anglicised)

Sermon

It often seems that people try to catch out, trip up, or put Christians on the spot, to confound us with tricky or difficult questions.

“Go on then. Prove to me that there’s a god.”

“Surely your god cannot be a loving god if he allows so much suffering?”

“If god is all powerful, why does he not end all the evil in the world?”

Sometimes, such questions are put because of a genuine desire to understand, to make sense of things, but often they are asked out of mischief, to knock what the Christian believes and to put down the Christian.

When we Christians, who live in the ‘so called’ West, are asked such questions and our answers do not satisfy our inquisitors, the worst we can expect is ridicule.

Many of our fellow Christians around the world, are asked difficult or ‘trick questions’ with the intention of exposing them within a society which is prejudiced toward them and or, tricking them into saying something that will get them into very serious trouble, often deadly trouble.

Ruppert Short, Religious Editor of the Times Literary Supplement and Visiting Fellow at Oxford University writes in his book Christianophobia of his concern that at least 200 million Christians (10% of the global total) are socially disadvantaged, harassed or actually oppressed for their beliefs and that Christianity is facing elimination in its Biblical

homeland.

Prince Charles, religious leaders and Leading politicians around the world have called for an end to the persecution of Christians.

Not that Christians are the only persecuted people for there are many others, but the persecution of Christians is pervasive, and in many places it is unrestrained and actively encouraged.

Which means that in such places our Christian brothers and sisters must be very careful in what they say and do and must exercise wisdom in the answers they give and the questions they ask.

When Jesus was approached by political and religious leaders, more often than not, they sought to trick Him into saying something that would get Him into bother with the authorities, or that would make Him appear foolish in the eyes of His followers and the people.

Remember how one set of religious leaders, the Pharisees, tried to trick Jesus into getting on the wrong side of the Romans, by asking him whether the Jewish people should pay taxes to Caesar? And do you remember how His answer confounded them?

There was another set of powerful religious leaders, the Sadducees, they thought that they would have a go at Jesus and see if they could do what their opponents, the Pharisees, could not. The Sadducees ask Jesus a question about life after death, (Sadducees did not believe in life after death), a question designed to make Him look foolish, but yet again we see how Jesus confounded those who came to Him with trick questions.

When the Pharisees and the Sadducees realized that Jesus was not so easily caught out (As if they could ever catch Him out: the arrogance

is breathtaking), and that He had in fact made them look foolish, they came together.

These two Religious Parties that would normally have nothing to do with each other, had in their common enmity toward Jesus, decided to form an alliance, to pool their resources and efforts to get rid of Him.

Together they come up with a cunning question, and they get someone who is an expert in the law, one of their best men to ask it.

Now we must keep in mind that this question was asked of Jesus, not because they wanted to know the truth, but in order to test Jesus, to catch Him out. (We see how determined they were to get rid of Jesus, when we realize that they were not even interested in the right answer to such an important question).

“Teacher,” the lawyer begins, and we can note the irony here, since he and his overlords considered Jesus an upstart with no authority to teach, “Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?”

Jesus replied,

“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 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.”

What we see here is that these two commandments mirror the Ten Commandments in order: the first four of the Ten Commandments speak of our attitudes and obligations to God, the other six deal with our attitudes and obligations to one another.

In the first of the commandment's to which Jesus refers, He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a passage known as the Shema Israel, literally, 'Hear Israel.'

'Hear Israel' are the first two words of a section of the Torah, the Law in Hebrew Bible (Our Old Testament), which serves as the centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish daily Prayer.

In 1st Century Palestine it was said at the beginning of every service in the Temple and in the synagogues. It was written on tiny vellum scrolls and placed into 'Phylacteries,' which are small leather boxes attached by leather straps to the arm and the forehead of Jewish men at times of prayer.

Similarly, the Shema was put inside small boxes, which were attached near the doors of the house.

This passage of scripture was so important to the Jews of all parties, that there would be no disagreement from them over Jesus' claim that this is the greatest commandment.

The 2nd commandment, which Jesus likens to the 1st, is a verse from Leviticus 19 (Verse 18):

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Now these two commandments have one word in common, 'Love;' love God, love your fellow human beings, but to love God first is the most important, since it is only in loving God that we are able to truly love others.

We are to love God with our whole being, with every faculty, our heart, our soul our mind.

By loving God this way, we find that far from expending our love and our energy, we experience them expanding and overflowing to others.

When our appreciation of God grows, so our appreciation of His creation grows, we see the world, the universe as His loving handiwork, we see our fellow human beings as His, made in His image.

Sure, at times it can be difficult to see how some people are made in the image of God: what of the person in a constant state of insensibility or near unconsciousness due to an addiction to alcohol or drugs.

What of the person who is prone to violence?

What of the self-indulgent and the selfish?

What of the greedy and the lazy?

Well in short, yes! These people are made in the image of God.

There is a tendency to think that only the respectable, only the religious people have been made in image of God, but that is not what the Scripture teach us: every human being has been made in His image.

Something of God is reflected in everyone and we must look for that. In some, that image may have been obscured for many reasons, not least because of their rejection of God and His ways, but if we look hard enough we will see it. We who profess Christ, as our Lord must love others as fellow creatures lovingly made and given life by God.

And we must love them as we love ourselves. Ah, but how do we love ourselves?

If love means doing what is best for another, then surely this applies to self.

There are many people who do not love themselves, they abuse their body, their mind and their soul, they do so because they either feel unworthy, or possibly they even hate themselves and want to punish themselves. We must pray for those who despise themselves, it is a cause of great suffering; we must pray that one day that may realize and accept that they have been made in the image of God, that they are loved by Him and that He counts them of such worth and value, that Jesus Christ His only son sacrificed His life for them, to show them just how much they are loved.

In as much as we care for ourselves we must care for our neighbour; this may be little at first, but as God expands our hearts in love for Him, so our hearts expand in love for others. As we get to know God better, the more easily we see His image in others.

Both the passages Jesus quoted were well known to the religious leaders, but it seems He was the first to put these two passages together.

Love of God must exude into love for our neighbour. You see there are those who claim that their love of God is so great, but they ignore the needs of those around them. Then there are those who claim that their love for their neighbour is so very deep, and they think God is unnecessary.

Jesus puts these two together, and puts them in order of importance. If we believe God is the source of all true love, then surely we must find our love of others from Him, the Source.

Jesus goes on, "On these two commandments," (Note they are commandments, not suggestions) depend all the Law and the Prophets."

In other words, all that can be learned in the Scriptures must come from and result in, these two commandments. Let us remind ourselves what these are:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Oh, remember those tricky questions at the beginning of this sermon? Well, when the Christian has the two commandments that Jesus spoke of uppermost in their heart, soul and mind, they may not be able to answer to every question, but they are able to love those who ask them and to point them to the one who has the answer to all things.

God bless,

Prayers of Intercession:

[Silence may follow each of the petitions.]

For the sake of all that is needed by Earth, its people,
and our churches,
let us pray, saying,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For people of faith in every land, in every religion,
and in every home,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For the church of Christ,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For world leaders, peacekeepers,
diplomats, and government workers,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For trees and plants, creatures large and small,
for pets and working animals,
for oceans, winds, and soil,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For farmers in this harvest time,
for those who fish and hunt,
for those who ship and store what is gathered,
and for those who cook and serve,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For children in school, teachers, and parents,
and for those who have no schools,
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For health workers and carers.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For shop workers and food suppliers.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For those who collect our refuse.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For those who work in banks and those who keep our financial services running.
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For all else the church is concerned with on this day . . .
[Your own petitions],
Holy God, hear our prayer.

For all that we have not named but which you know, O Lord,
we trust that you will hear our prayer
in the name of Christ Jesus, our Saviour. Amen.

(FOW worship)

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy

Spirit be upon you. Amen!