

Sermon Trinity 20

Exodus 22.20-26, psalm 18, Thessalonians 1.5-10, Matthew 22.34-40

A question of love.

In today's Gospel Jesus answers yet another question from the Pharisees. "Which is the greatest commandment of the law?" He answers with what we call the great summary of the law – love God and love neighbour as self.

Our Lord's commandment to his disciples on the night before he died on the cross was "love one another as I have loved you." He called it a **new** commandment not because the nature of God's love had changed but because of the nature of its manifestation - how it was shown - had changed. The fullness of God's love which was always and ever the same was made clear in the – the sacrificial love shown on the cross is the love at the heart of God. Love is at the heart of things, and at the heart of all Jesus's answers even if it is not the motivator of the question.

Just over a week ago I was given the task of explain the relationship of Religion and science, and Christianity and the bible including the first creation story to thirty 9 and 10 year olds. Their questions had I was told, gone beyond the confidence of the teacher to answer. They listed their questions helpfully and I was given an hour to cover the subject with 90 questions!!! They included why are dinosaurs not mentioned in the bible, is the big bang theory true or was the world made in 6 days, how was God born, why did he make Covid 19, has anyone seen God since the bible ended and are we in a simulation!???

I couldn't help but think that these questions were in some ways harder than the onslaught of questions Jesus got from the Pharisees. Mercifully I managed to divide the year and have 2 sessions but still a challenge. One big difference of course was that these questions were not designed to catch me out and test my orthodoxy but real questions from growing minds about the nature of the world and creation around us. Much of our time was taken with the nature of questions and accepting that not all our questions can be answered. The journey of the scientist leads to more questions and the journey of the person of faith leads to more too. To stop asking questions is akin to stop being human – it is part of being made in the image of God. Of course the science and faith journeys are not separate journeys though largely of course the journey of science is to ask **how** and that of faith is to ask **why**? Both types of question evoke the "so what" question what does this mean for me and the world. Answers to either type of question fuel the journey they do not stop it – only false answers do that.

The answer to **why** does God create out of nothing and manifest himself in Jesus is Love. Love is in the beginning, it is behind the Law. In a sense it is the word that runs through the bible like the name of our town in a stick of rock. We of course only have

the one word for love, Jesus in his native tongue and in Greek the language of the new testament there are several. We know such a little word that can mean many things. The love of a good meal is very different from the love of a child or our dear departed.

Jesus says the same love should be shown to God to self and to neighbour...no differentiation. This double commandment is like two sides of a coin and cannot be split. **Agape love** – everything total, sacrificial, pure, mindful of the other and wanting the best for them, it is a type of love that can only be used of a person not a thing or activity. This is the word Jesus uses but more so this is what he *shows* – in his life, passion death and resurrection.

The journey of faith continues only when in prayer and worship in reflection and thought we ask more questions. So what does this mean for us now? If this is the answer to why God creates is the essence of his character how should I respond if I am made in his image and loved so much? That takes us into the whole realm of social, political and religious action behind that little question of last week and that little coin – you remember render unto to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's. Love God and neighbour as self is not about thought though it starts in the heart and mind – it is about action and behaviour and there is not neat division of life into the God bits, the neighbour bits and the self bits.

How we got into this pandemic mess is undoubtedly related to us forgetting our place in the midst of creation. How we get out of it or live with it will equally require the type of love agape at the heart of God and shown in Jesus. Our behaviours in matters small and large determine our understanding and living of that love.

The wearing of a mask may or may not be effective, the distancing between us of 1, 2 or 3 metres, may or may not be effective answers but love says that for us the intent is not primarily for the protection of self but the other. Fear has a different intent. People make their own decisions for their own reasons. With love, someone who is unwell staying away from others becomes less about self than care for others. Of course we all know folk who recoil from the train ride to work and occasional church visit only to do some more shopping or visit the pub, restaurant or neighbours house. But the best of human nature at this time is about the other and not the self. The best we might call Covid Caring the other Coviditus.

Selfless love on the one hand, and self-centred fear on the other, were long standing themes in the scriptures long before Jesus of Nazareth. But though love is not changed Christ shows it in its fullest light. Fear by contrast is banished like a shadow with glorious light - a light and love yes shown as never before but offered too and freely given from the cross to each of us.

The more secure we are in that love the less we shall fear. Fear and sin crush and age us, love and security frees and renews. As St. John puts it: *perfect love casts out fear*.

Such love is perfected when we first love God with all our strength and mind and soul and then adopt the same love to self and to neighbour; it embraces all questions and provides fuels a journey beyond this life into the heart of God.

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