23rd October 2011 19th Sunday after Pentecost

JohnJohn Dunnill

Leviticus 19: 1-12, 15-18 ; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 22:34-46

They say if you want to get attention you need to talk about money or sex. Last week I talked about money: this week I'm going to talk – well, actually, I'm not going to talk about sex at all. I'm going to talk about love. Is love an acceptable substitute for sex?

The context of thinking about love is the Gospel's presentation again of Jesus' teaching in the Temple – Jesus the one who speaks the word and the wisdom of God, Jesus the one who is the Word and the Wisdom of God.

That Jesus is the Holy One, the Anointed, the Messiah, is witnessed twice in this short reading, in quotations from two Psalms which are about the coronation of the King, the Messiah. Jesus interprets that puzzling line from Psalm 110 "the Lord (that is God), said to my Lord, (that is, the Messiah), "sit at my right hand". He points out that, paradoxically, the one who is David's son is also David's Lord, and that will be seen when he sits at the right hand of God.

But before that another Psalm of the same kind, Psalm 2, is echoed. In that psalm we read: "The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers gather together against the Lord, against His Anointed. In this passage of the gospel we are told twice that the Pharisees and Sadducees "gather together" with evil intent against Jesus to test him and to question him. And when their questioning is silenced and they know he is God's anointed, then they will crucify him.

But first there is the test: what is the greatest commandment? It seems like a demand to boil the whole law down, to put it all in a nutshell. Theology is so complicated – can't you keep it simple?

Others had asked the same question. This is actually part of a long running debate in the Judaism of Jesus' day. We are told that a disciple went to the great rabbi Hillel, who lived at the same time, and challenged him: "Can you teach me the whole Law while standing on one leg?" Whether Hillel stood on one leg or not is not recorded, but he did reply with the so called "Golden Rule": Do not do to others what you do not wish them to do to you", and he said: "That is the whole

Law, the rest is commentary" and then like a good teacher he told the would-be disciple "Go and learn it".

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives the same answer, only in a positive rather than a negative form. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" and he comments similarly: "for this is the law and the prophets" (that is, it is to be obeyed). That Golden Rule is a handy rule-of-thumb, isn't it? Whether it's negative as usually: "Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you" or positive as Jesus taught it: "Do to others what you do want them to do to you". Either way it asks us to remember that other people are people like us and before we do an action, to stop and reflect: How would I feel if someone did that to me?

It is useful but it has its limitations. For one thing, it doesn't leave any space for the difference between me and another person. We really may want and need different things, if you treat it in a literalistic fashion. And from a Jewish perspective its limitation is that it's not Jewish – it's found on the lips of Greek philosophers and Indian sages, but it's not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. You may use it to sum up the Law as Rabbi Hillel did but it isn't found in the Law, so it can't be "the greatest commandment". Was that the trap the Pharisees' lawyer was setting for Jesus? Maybe. Jesus' answer (in part) was, instead, to pick up a verse from Leviticus 19: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

This is in some ways like the Golden Rule – it tells us to think about others as like ourselves – but it is much richer and wider. For one thing it is much more concrete: it is not talking about "other people" in some abstract sense, it is talking about people as our neighbours – people with whom we are in particular concrete relationships. The people who live in our street, the people we work with, the people who are our family and our friends, or at least in that context, the people who are fellow Jews, in a wider sense, sharers of the same nation.

For us the world is wider than when that was first formed and our sense of neighbourliness has thinned, sometimes almost to breaking point,but still this law reminds us that –
the customer we're about to cheat,
or the employer we're about to steal from,
or the motorist whose car we're about to bash in a fit of road rage –
is our neighbour, one with whom we belong together in this complex society.

As Christians we can hardly let neighbourliness stop at our shores, can we? In a global village we are in relation with people everywhere,

people whose crops we consume, people whose lives we influence by our decisions. And if that person, whoever they are, is our neighbour, then – this Law says - we owe them love (as they owe us love; but that's another matter, we owe them love). The wellbeing and the happiness of the community (and therefore our well being and happiness) depend in the long run on there being more love, not less. Therefore everything depends on the decision we make now.

If you think the word love sounds a bit flimsy and wishy-washy – and I want to say it's anything but flimsy – then avoid the temptation to take this saying: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" as a slogan without a context. Avoid the temptation to reduce it to five little letters, LYNAY and write it on a wristband, to remind you of it, as a handy reference, like "What would Jesus do?"

Instead, to see what it actually means, we need to go back to that passage in Leviticus chapter 19. We need to look it up. In the last verse of our Old Testament reading we find that this is in fact just part of the verse and it says: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD". Loving is not about feeling affection (though that's not a bad thing) it is a concrete alternative to taking vengeance on my neighbour for something I believe they've done. And they may well have done it – my neighbour may not be a nice person at all – but then I might not be a nice person either – that's not the point. We are commanded to treat them as neighbours, bound together as members of a community in which God has (for God's own reason) placed us both. And if we're not to take vengeance outwardly, we're equally not to internalise the vengeance in the form of a grudge, a buried desire for vengeance which can go on for years and so easily sours relationships and makes communities grow cold.

If you look still wider in that chapter, if you don't just take it out of the pew sheet but go back to Leviticus chapter 19 and you look at the chapter as a whole, you find that the whole chapter makes plain that "neighbour love" is especially needed by the needy, the people at the margins who we may prefer not to recognise as neighbours at all.

We read: "When you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or pick the scraps that you drop or gather the fallen grape in your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God". Translate that into whatever terms are applicable for you.

And likewise: "You shall not defraud your neighbour or keep back the wages of a labourer until morning". Translate that into whatever is appropriate for you. And it goes beyond loving our official neighbours. The passage says, in verse 34; "The alien who resides with you shall be as the citizen among you. You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord." Translate that into whatever is appropriate for you.

So we can't escape by asking, as a lawyer did ask Jesus on one occasion, "who is my neighbour?" in other words, Who am I allowed not to love? Everyone is, or is potentially, my neighbour under God and like it or not we are bound to each other.

Many would applaud, therefore, if Jesus had said this was the greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". St Paul would. He tells us twice that this law sums up and fulfils the whole law (Psalm 13). And so would St James, who calls it "the royal law" (Chapter 2 verse 8). But I think they're wrong. The law, after all, is not only about how we deal with each other, it's also (perhaps more fundamentally) about how we deal with God. There is the law of worship as well as the moral law. There are two tablets of the Ten Commandments, (four of them about God and six of them about other people) and the Book of Leviticus that we've been quoting from has 27 chapters of which 21 deal with worship.

So Jesus insists that there are *two* great commandments, and the first is: "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". That is from Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5 and it is linked to the great monotheistic summons of the Shema', the Creed and the Lord's Prayer of Judaism, recited daily and bound on to the doorposts in those funny boxes called mezuzahs which I talked about a few months ago. That text says: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord alone and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind".

We need the two commands, the two loves. The command to "love your neighbour", good as it is, will not necessarily lead us to God. If it is actually taken by itself it could as easily dwindle down from loving my neighbour to vaguely respecting my neighbour, to not hitting my neighbour in case he or she hits me back. You can end with a weird vacuum where nothing is right or wrong, you can do what you like to your neighbour and the only rule is "Don't get caught". That seems to be the way it is for many in our society. Perhaps it always is, but you can't build a good society or a rich community on that basis.

But if we start with God, and the command and the aspiration to love God, we can hardly fail to find ourselves also bound to love our neighbour who is made by God. After all, loving God with all our heart, soul and mind doesn't mean having intense feelings of love towards God (though again, they don't go amiss), it means obeying God in all we think and feel and say and do, orienting ourselves on the Holy One, the divine source of all life, allowing our lives to be bound up with that divine life. So loving God is ultimately about my actions and therefore about living at peace with others according to the laws and guidelines God gives us.

The fact is, we shouldn't need that second command, we shouldn't need to be reminded to give practical love to our neighbour. It should flow naturally from a heart grounded in the love of God. And that's what Jesus invites us to do.

So when people tell me they're too busy doing justice-work to go to church, then I wonder. Love is not our invention, and trying to generate a pure love for my neighbour out of my self can so easily go wrong as I require someone to do what I want in the name of love. The only pure source of love is God and we shall learn love – love free from the distortions of self – only by contemplating God and imitating God, letting God remake us. If it's true that we become like what we love – this seems the place to start.

This is the love and wisdom we see in Jesus. The wisdom of a life ordered by God and finding in God its peace and its beauty.

It is the picture of life drawn in today's lovely Psalm, Psalm 1: "Blessed are the ones whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who ponder that law day and night. They are like trees planted beside streams of water that yield their fruit in due season.

May the life-giving stream flow through us and yield fruit for those we live among and those in need, the people God sends us to love.

The Lord be with you.