



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Last Sunday after Trinity

readings: [Deuteronomy 34 1-12](#); [1 Thessalonians 2 1-8](#); [Matthew 22 34-46](#).

29 October 2023

As a preacher I have long had a difficult relationship with the compilers of the lectionary, querying on many occasions their apparently abstruse choice of readings. This morning they have excelled themselves. For this Last Sunday after Trinity, which former teachers like me may recognise as having a bit of an “end of term” feeling about it, because of coming to the end of a long sequence of lessons spread across 21 “Sundays after Trinity”, and exacerbated by schools having broken up for half-term and the clocks having gone back, the lectionary compilers have actually offered a cornucopia of choice, with *three* alternative sets of readings, depending on how you propose to celebrate this Last Sunday after Trinity.

So we are offered:

- readings if we are going to celebrate this as Bible Sunday, which we are not.
- readings if we are going to celebrate this as a Dedication Festival, which we are not, because this cathedral is dedicated to All Saints, to be celebrated next Sunday. But incidentally however, yesterday, 28<sup>th</sup> October was the 96<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hallowing of the parish church of All Saints to become the Cathedral Church of the new diocese of Derby in 1927. It was a hallowing not without uncertainty as to whether there would be enough space in the new cathedral for processional ceremonies, and with the new bishop Edmund Courtney Pearce expressing his own uncertainties as to whether his living for 40 years within the walls of a Cambridge college was adequate preparation for the task ahead. But it turned out alright in the end!
- and then there are the readings for Proper 25, designated the Last Sunday after Trinity, which are the ones we have actually chosen for today.

Fortunately all these sets of readings display a common theme, which can be summed up as “*Reducing it to Essentials*”. It demands of the preacher the application of William of Occam’s razor: the 14C “parsimony principle” that demands that “necessities must not be multiplied more than necessary”, or in more modern terms: “don’t over-complicate it”. As they say in the USA, “KISS: Keep it Simple, Stupid”.

So if this were Bible Sunday (which it is not), I would reduce it to its essentials by using the techniques of the Reduced Shakespeare Company who claim to be able to perform the whole of the Bible in 10 minutes, reducing it to its essentials. And for me, those core essentials are well summed up in the statement we will collectively make later in this Eucharist: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”.

If we were celebrating a Dedication Festival (which we are not), the set readings would be about Jesus cleansing the Temple and the children crying out “Hosanna to the Son of David” to the great annoyance of the Pharisees. So I would have chosen as my text Jesus’ riposte: “Out of the mouths of infants and babes” (Matt 21 16) because children have a knack for getting directly to the heart of the matter, reducing it to its bare essentials.

But we are using the readings specifically set for the Last Sunday after Trinity, where in the gospel we have heard read (Matt 22 36) Jesus is asked: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”, or put more simply “what are the real essentials here”?

Let's start at the beginning with a starter for 10. Say "Commandments" to most folk and they will call to mind the 10 Commandments recorded in Deuteronomy 5, the Commandments which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai to be the Law of the Children of Israel as they sought the Promised Land, the land which, as recorded in our OT lesson, Moses was able to see before his death but not actually enter.

These 10 Commandments, the "Thou shalt not" prohibitions on murder, adultery, theft, envy etc, were later summarised, made more positive, and reduced to their essentials in Deuteronomy 6 v5 as simply "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your might" and then in Leviticus 19 v18: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

It is these two Great Commandments between which Jesus, by a clever Pharisee trying as ever to trick him, is being asked to adjudicate on "which is the greatest". And as our gospel reading records, Jesus replies "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul, with all your mind: this is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Notice 3 things about Jesus' reply:

- There's an inseparability between these two commandments: to love God *and* to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus says the Second Commandment is "like" the first one: it gives it focus and pinpoints the way in which the love of God can find practical expression in love of neighbour, the sort of practical expression that Saint Paul exhorts in his Letter to the Thessalonians in our NT lesson, to treat others as gently as a nurse would care for her own children.
- But whilst the two Great Commandments are inseparable, neither is fully dissolved into the other. Delivering the mandate to love your neighbour as yourself, for example in engaging in acts of social service or being actively involved in struggles for justice, does *not* mean the First Commandment to love God is no longer significant. Atheists and Humanists can, and indeed do, fulfil the Second Commandment, often in ways that put avowed Christians to shame. But the First Commandment remains *first*. There is a dimension of loving God that goes beyond simply loving your neighbour. God is the ultimate frame of reference for service and indeed for the living of life. And our constant search for a greater knowledge of God by wrestling with the many challenges of how to put our faith into practice, is as essential to our locating of our actions within that ultimate frame of reference as are our acts of worship and prayer.
- Yet thirdly, Jesus shows himself as the supreme interpreter of the Law, and when he declares that love of God coupled with love of neighbour is the key to understanding "all the law and the prophets" he is making an extremely radical statement. He is reconfiguring the old Law of the scribes & pharisees, the Law of Moses which had been interpreted and amplified, expanded and contextualised by successive generations of lawyers to formulate thousands of rules and regulations, rituals and ceremonials, procedures and precedents governing every possible action and situation in life. That great edifice is now reduced to its essentials. The commandment of the scribes was that rules and regulations rule; the commandment of God, exemplified by Jesus, is that love comes first. Love can do no wrong to a neighbour; for "Love is the fulfilment of the Law".

A thousand rules reduced not to 10 Commandments but simply to 2: Love God, and love your neighbour, be it a displaced Gazan child, a distraught Israeli hostage, a desperate Ukrainian civilian, or a detained UK asylum seeker. All are our neighbours.

Ann Patchett in her book of essays "These Perfect Days" tells the true story of an old priest who only had one funeral homily, and he had used it many, many times. It became so familiar that the servers could recite it word for word. The priest would say: "We are on this earth to get ready to die. And when we die, God's not going to say: 'What did you do for a living? How much money did you make? How many houses did you have? God's only going to ask us 2 questions: 'Did you love Me?' and 'Did you love your neighbour?'"

And if you can answer truthfully 'Lord, you know I loved You. You know I loved my neighbour', then God will say: "Well done good and faithful servant. Now enter into the kingdom of heaven".

Two Godly questions based on two Great Commandments.

But dare we take this reduction to essentials still further? The 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian St Augustine of Hippo certainly did. He recognised that to love God fully and completely means we must choose to live out our faith based on the love of God and for our love of God.

Because we love God, we are therefore committed to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Because we love God, we are therefore called to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us.

Because we love God, we are therefore compelled to seek justice for those who are persecuted.

Because we love God, everything else just falls into place.

In this way, what pleases you and what pleases God become one and the same, such that if you love God, you can do whatever pleases you, and God will be pleased.

So in a pithy phrase which would make a great advertising banner strung across the front of our churches, Augustine reduces 1000 regulations to just a single tenet:

*"Love God...and do what you like".*

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