

Sermon for Fourteenth after Trinity, 2021

Deuteronomy 10:12-19. 1 Thessalonians 5:9-24. Psalm 145:8-13.
Luke 10:25-37.

The Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Luke 10:25 ‘And behold, a certain lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying: teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’

During the week, I heard a woman speaking from Afghanistan after the Taliban had taken power. She claimed to have been rebuked by a young Talib for wearing clothes that, he claimed, were not sharia-compliant. Perhaps she could have asked him what exactly he meant: how had she failed to meet the specifications? The Talib, as far as we know, was not an Imam, a teacher of sharia. He had no need to justify himself, or sharia, to her. She must just obey. Similarly, I was told of a young man visiting his parents on Shabbat in London. They lived in a tower block, and, being observant, he could not ring the buzzer to alert them to his presence outside. To do so would have been to create a fire/spark, which is forbidden on Shabbat in the Torah. So he had to shout until they heard him and let him in. So, in these two situations we can illustrate problems resulting from attempts to interpret a written code. One person interprets the code in one way, and another person disagrees. Both, at best, want to be obedient to God. But, the code has become a substitute for God.

Translations of Luke 10:25 (e.g. Darby, Smith), make it clear from both the Greek and the cultural background, that the lawyer/scribe is, like an Imam, trained in religious law. Further, he puts the question this way: ‘having done what, shall I inherit eternal life?’ In other words, he is putting Jesus on the spot by implying that there is one commandment that, having done it, will result in eternal life. He implies that he has been keeping the Torah strictly, and therefore deserves to know which commandment in particular warranted his qualification to inherit eternal life. But, he is showing off! After quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4,5 & Leviticus 19:18, (You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself) the scribe/lawyer pushes the religious exercise to ask another question, namely, ‘and who is my neighbour?’ So, showing off his knowledge of the written codes, he desires to justify himself to Jesus. But, to justify what? His own righteousness, or his own superiority over Jesus as a scribal lawyer?

Leviticus 19:18, says that you should not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. In this light, Jesus pushes the concept of heartfelt care for a neighbour beyond that of one’s own people, to that of an outsider, namely, a Samaritan. Furthermore, this commandment is justified by an assertion at the end: ‘I am the Lord (Yahweh)’. Checkmate! God doesn’t have to depend on scribal banter to win an argument about the validity of His own commandments. Likewise, God the Son, Jesus, being part of the Godhead when the commandments were given to Moses, is not there to be put to the test by a lawyer. Indeed, Jesus challenges the lawyer/scribe’s heart and mind throughout the parable of the

‘Good Samaritan.’ Even the words ‘leaving him half-dead’ gave the rabbis cause for debate, as *imminent* death transiting to *actual* death had consequences in terms of the ritual purity of a priest or levite. Much more can be said about this parable, but, not in detail today. Suffice it to say that the lawyer/scribe was challenged to go beyond the status of an Academic, to one who must involve himself in the sad reality of life in this world; even if this meant putting himself at risk of ritual defilement and danger for an enemy.

What does it mean to us, to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart...? Can we just regard this statement as a short summary of the Ten Commandments, being mostly unaware of the other 603? We can hardly begin to comply with even the Ten. Perhaps, like the lawyer, we can ask God to be more specific about what He means when He commands us not to steal or murder, or not to commit adultery? Of course, this is like asking: ‘What part of *not* don’t you understand? So, what gives us the hubris to put God to the test? In Greek tragedy ‘hubris’ was the extreme pride or arrogance towards the gods that led a character to meet their nemesis. This nemesis was Rhamnusia, the goddess who enacts retribution on those who succumbed to hubris against the gods. Ultimately, mortals can’t get away with anything that they have done against the divine plan.

But, the Gospel truth is that we have to recognise hubris within ourselves and confess it. As we have discovered in the last two sermons, hiding behind religiosity is of no lasting value as it doesn’t lead us into a new relationship with God and with those who cross our path. The Torah states that we should *love* the Lord our God. Do we? Or, rather, do we *like* church? The latter can be a sham, and the former can be shallow and go no deeper than the intellect. Further, the Hebrew of ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart’, can be translated ‘you **must** love the Lord your God...’ This is not an invitation, it is a commandment, it is the priority from which all else follows. The commandments are not well-intentioned requests. Their sole authority rests in the suffix: I am Yahweh. But, you can’t force yourself to love; you have to be loved by the Holy Spirit first; then you will know what this phenomenon is. It takes surrender, not technical knowledge.

Yet, by our very nature, we constantly put God to the test. Heart, soul, strength, mind. That’s what God says we should apply. But, what do we *do*: half-heartedly, soullessly, weakly, thoughtlessly? Is that the extent of our desire to live with God eternally? Why bother? But, St Paul tells the Thessalonians (5:9): ‘God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ He goes on to say that Christ’s will for them is that they should ‘rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil.’ These are fruits of the Holy Spirit. They catalyse our heart, soul, strength and mind. They are activated by invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit to come to into us from heaven. They are fruits of the gift of grace into the mind, heart and soul which acknowledges their need of forgiveness.

As our Collect for today reminds us to pray: ‘make us to love that which thou dost command, through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Amen. This is the way to enter eternal life.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.