

## LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOUR

Leviticus 19. 1-2, 15-18

1 Thessalonians 2. 1-8

Matthew 22. 34-46

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story about the man who rang a law firm. He picked up his phone, dialled the number and said, 'I want to speak to my lawyer'. The receptionist replied, 'I'm sorry, sir, but he died last week.' The man then hung up.

The next day, the same man telephoned the same law firm and asked the same question; to which the receptionist responded, 'I told you yesterday, sir. He died last week.' The man quickly rang off.

The following day, the man rang the law firm again and asked to speak to his lawyer. By this time, the receptionist was getting a bit annoyed. She said to the man, 'Look, sir, I keep telling you that your lawyer died last week. Why on earth do you keep calling?'

The man replied, 'Because I just love hearing you say that.'

Lawyers, it must be said, have not always had the best reputation! In New Testament times, however, lawyers were not like modern-day solicitors or barristers; they were more like theologians. They studied the Law – The Torah – or the Books of the Law in the Old Testament. And the Law was considered to be good, because it contains the salvation history of God's chosen people.

Even today, when the scrolls of the Law are brought out of the ark in a modern synagogue, they are carried around and through the people so that the people can reverence them. And when a new Torah scroll is dedicated in a modern synagogue, it is not just carried around and through the people; it is ‘danced’ through the people. In a similar way, the Book of the Gospels is carried out to the people at St Stephen’s Church because it contains the story of our salvation; and at the end of the Gospel reading, the gospel book is honoured with a kiss, a symbol of our love.

In our appointed gospel reading from St Matthew, our Lord meets a lawyer – a scribe – someone who had studied the Torah and had tried to understand it. This lawyer asked Jesus which commandment in the Law is the greatest. We are told that he did this in order to test him, in the hope of tripping him up. But Christ simply responds in the way that any good Jew would. He says, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.’ This first commandment was an almost literal repetition of the Shema, a prayer found in the book of Deuteronomy (6. 4) that all Jews recited in their morning and evening prayers. Our Lord then added a second commandment to it, quoting from Leviticus (19. 9-18), saying that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The reason that Jesus replied with not only a first commandment but also a second one ‘like unto it’ was not to set these two commandments at the top of the list of the 613 commandments that are given in the Torah. Rather, it was to show that the love of God and the love of one’s neighbour are inextricably connected. Loving God, and loving our neighbours: these are the two steps of the Christian journey to eternal life.

Why should we love God? The short answer is that we love God because God is himself. God is the source of all that exists. God is the source of my existence and

of yours. We live, because God *is*. The world we live in exists, because God *is*. He is entirely creative and he is entirely eternal, meaning that before any thing was, God was there. He is first and last; there is nothing that preceded God, and there will be nothing to come after him. What's more, in his perfect and unconditional love, God has searched each one of us out, and has known everyone and everything he ever brought into being. He knows everything that you and I do, whether we sit down or stand up; and he understands every thought that has ever crossed our minds. God has surrounded us and he knows and understands all our ways. There is not a word that I can speak that God won't hear; and there is not a thing that I can do that he won't see. His hand has touched every one of us. Wherever we go, God is there, whether we invite him there or not. God was there with us when we were knit together in our mother's womb; and he will be there with us when we make our bed in the grave. All of this knowledge about who God is (and how he loves us) is supposed to have an effect on us; and the desired effect is to *draw love out of us*.

When the lawyer asked Christ the trick question, he did not see or understand that he had at long last come to the one who embodies the fulfilment of the law. He had come to the one who embodies God's salvation for his chosen people, the one who is the Word of God and the Word made flesh. In Christ, all of the attributes of the Torah were now made visible in a human being who was also fully God; in a person who incarnated divine love itself and made it visible on earth. And God's intention was that we, who are the Body of our Lord, the living Word, should show this same divine love ourselves.

Yet as we all know, loving others is not always easy. To love one's neighbour is an act of the will. It means willing and doing good for our neighbours, as we would wish good to be willed and done for us. This second command of Jesus is not generally achieved by personal feelings. It often means setting aside our preferences; it means appreciating our neighbour and having the sensitivity to try to see things

through his or her eyes; and to walk through life as he or she might be walking through it. It means seeing our neighbours as fellow human beings, as brothers or sisters in the flesh; and above all, it means seeing them as children of God. A child of God bears God's image. If we claim to love God, then it follows that we shall love God's children.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked if her work was simply social work, and she said this:

'Because we cannot see Jesus, we cannot express our love to him; but our neighbours we can always see, and we can do to them what we would like to do to Christ if we saw him. That is where the love and the devotion come in; what we do, we do to our Lord, and that is why we try to do it as beautifully as possible. It is the same contact that we have in the Mass: in the Eucharist, we have Jesus in the appearance of bread and wine; but here in the slums, in the children, in the broken body, we see Christ and we touch him.'

Amen.