

Trinity 18

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel, these two commandments from our Lord:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

And.... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be alway acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew, in a way, perhaps summarizes our duties as a Christian and it evokes one's perception of an entangled legalistic argument. It deserves our attention and cannot be looked at in a cursory manner.

Indeed, in the passage we have two specific and significant questions: one asked by a lawyer, and the other posed by Jesus, which provoked a response that has become, if we may use the term, the *bulwark* of Christianity — ***love thy neighbor as thy self*** and ***love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, mind, and soul.***

Indeed, the one question asked by the lawyer elicits a response that re-interprets the whole legalistic framework of the Jewish religion; the other, posed by Jesus, re-interprets the Jewish concept of the Messiah into the ***Christian Messianic*** expectation.

In looking first at the second question, the one posed by our Lord, it is a turning of the tables. On a number of occasions, the Jewish authorities had tried to trap Jesus with pointed political and theological questions, such as the one about ***was it right to pay taxes to Caesar.***

Now, we see, in this passage, our Lord putting forth a sticky theological question: ***What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?***

The Pharisees responded: ***The son of David.***

Jesus responds with another question, ***How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying,*** and here, Jesus recites from David's 110th Psalm, specifically the first verse, of which there was consensus that it referred to the Messiah:

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand till I make thine enemies thy footstool?

Jesus ends by forcing the issue of the divine nature of the Messiah, saying:

If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?

Jesus simply asked how can the Messiah be both the son of David and David's Lord?

If He were the Son of David, then He must be human. But, if David calls Him Lord, then He must be God. How can the Messiah be both human and divine?

The answer could only point to the dual nature of the Messiah as both man and God, the prophetic implication of David's Psalm.

Alas, the Jewish authorities had, by this time, already sealed Jesus' fate. He would be put to death. Regardless of any argument, shy of a public demonstration of His **Divine Power**, the authorities were not about to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

Indeed, it had become so obvious that they could not, and would not, recognize their own Messiah, the one true Messiah out of the false ones who had preceded Him. Their unwavering perception of the Messiah was that of a militaristic figure.

The idea of a heavenly kingdom was out of their realm of experience. Only a dynamic, worldly figure, wielding temporal power to drive out the Roman aggressors, and return the land to its rightful owners, could fulfill their vision of a Messiah.

What Jesus Christ promised was not what they wanted, was not what they expected, and did not meet their immediate human needs.

Again, in the 110th Psalm, we hear the prophetic words of David:

The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies my footstool.

The question Jesus posed:

If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?

It was not a matter of the Jewish authorities understanding what Jesus was saying. Most probably, they did. But, from their perspective, the most pressing problem was the Roman occupation, and it required an immediate military solution; it was a here and now situation, not a hereafter.

Furthermore, Jesus, as His popularity and following increased, threatened the status quo, that is, the fine line that the Jewish leadership walked under the Roman occupation, allowing them not only the privilege of Temple Worship but also to retain power and wealth.

Thus, by this time, the die had been cast. There were no other options. Jesus posed a threat, so the scenario had to be played out. And, while the Jewish authorities may have thought they were in control, quite the contrary. This was part of God's plan for the redemption of his creation. They were not in control; God was.

But what about the first question posed by the lawyer?

In a way, it presupposes the second question, and the implication of a Divine Saviour, a Messiah whose action would be out of love, not hate, or the use of temporal power, but focused on **Divine Love**.

The sort of love that Christ represented to the world was not part of the thinking of that time. Love of God, yes. Love of family, yes. Love of a fellow Jew, yes.

But beyond that, it was the **Law** upon which they focused.

But what was that **Law** that Jesus and the Pharisees talk about?

It was the **Law of Moses**, that is, the **Law** expounded by Moses, and recorded in the first five books of the **Bible**, referred to as the **Torah**.

The Jews liked to discuss the Law, and debate among themselves which commandment of the Law was the greatest. Some would say **keeping the Sabbath** was the greatest, while others might say that the **Law of Circumcision** was the greatest. Such was their debate and concern in understanding the Law.

The lawyers to whom Matthew and others refer are those learned in the **Law of Moses**; they were not necessarily lawyers in the legal profession.

The **Law** by this time had become rather convoluted as, over the centuries, the legalists attempted to define and redefine its meaning. The Scribes found it necessary to clarify in the minutest detail exactly what was meant by each aspect of the **Law**. It grew over time to 613 commandments.

As the Pharisees were gathered together, Matthew in today's Gospel reading recounts that a lawyer, that is, a student of the ***Law of Moses***, approached Jesus with a question. This was a question to try Him, or to test His knowledge of the Law.

The question posed — what was the great commandment of the ***Law*** — from their perspective was a knotty and difficult question with which they hoped to ensnare Jesus, and to expose Him to the people as an ignorant man.

Which is the greatest of the commandments in the ***Law***?

At issue was not just the ***Ten Commandments***. In reality, the lawyer was asking which of the 613 commandments of the expanded law was the greatest.

Our Lord's reply was typical, being first the ***Shema***, as it was recorded in Mark's account of this event, which began:

Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord

Matthew, though, writing from the Jewish perspective, takes this for granted, omitting verse 4, and records our Lord's response as:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Thus, we can see that the response was in part from the ***Shema***, Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 through 9, the significance of which, in this context, becomes clearer when we take a moment to read them:

***Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:
And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.
And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:
And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.
And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.***

And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

These verses from Deuteronomy were repeated twice each day by the Jews.

But Jesus added a second commandment to the *Shema*: *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*

This second commandment expressing the love toward one's neighbor can be found in 19th Chapter of Leviticus, which itself is partly an explanation of the *Ten Commandments* delivered to Moses directly by God. The 18th verse reads:

Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

Jesus, rather than being ensnared by the lawyer's question, turned it around, and effectively put the Pharisees to silence. His response had summarized the entire *Law of Moses*, both in respect to man's duty to God, and man's duty to his fellow man.

In his response to the lawyer, we find that Jesus has defined most completely what religion is: it is loving God. And from that love of God issues a love of others, indeed, a love of all of **God's Creation**.

It is this that sets us apart as Christians, a relationship built, not on fear and servility, not on external obedience to a set of laws, but on love: God's love of us, and our love of him.

Love God. Love your neighbor. These two summarize the *Ten Commandments*, and our duty towards God and towards others.

In the *Ten Commandments*, we find these two divisions detailed. The first four *Commandments* define our duty towards God. The remaining six define our duty towards others.

In reciting the *Shema* to the lawyer, Jesus is setting forth what is required of us in our relationship with God and defining our religious life: love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind: a total commitment of self to God.

Jesus is telling us that we must give to God total love. This love of God must dominate our emotions, direct our thoughts, and energize our actions.

It is a total commitment of life to God, from which issues a love of others, and a defining of our religious life.

To love our neighbor as ourselves: this is a love of humanity, not to be confused with sentimentality.

We are only able to love our neighbor because we have that complete love of God. Without it, we can see only the ugly, the despicable; we can see only what makes us angry, rather than the beauty of all God's creation.

Because we were created in the image of God, we have not only the ability to choose between right and wrong; we have more, more than any other of God's creatures.

We have the full range of emotions that only human beings can have the centerpiece of which is love.

Stamped with the image of God, we can choose to accept his Love and Grace, freely given to us, and, in so accepting, we choose to commit our hearts, and souls, and minds in love to God.

When we accept God's Love and Grace, we will find loving him to be irresistible. Then, in the knowledge and love of God, knowing that through his Love we have been redeemed by the sacrifice of his Son Jesus Christ in the ultimate act of love, we can approach that **Peace of God** which passes all understanding.