

Matthew 22:34-46

The Greatest Commandment

Testing questions

It's important to realise that by this time Jesus was fast approaching the key point of his ministry – his showdown with the authorities that resulted in his arrest and crucifixion. Yes, that wasn't going to be the end of the matter as we know the resurrection was to follow. But it is easy for us to look back on this time and forget that at this point the hope of the resurrection was distant, overshadowed by the dark clouds that hung over Jesus and his followers – trouble lay ahead, deep trouble. At the same time, Jesus' influence was rising. Huge crowds were gathering, intent on listening to his every word. His opponents were listening carefully too – looking for the opportunity to catch him out. Today, we have another testing question. This time, it seems, asked genuinely seeking an answer, rather than one designed to trap Jesus. What is the greatest commandment of all? Jesus answers in two parts – firstly: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And then: and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two hang all the law and prophets.

Not that he meant that we could ditch the rest of the Bible and ignore its teaching. Rather that these are at the heart of the gospel – that everything else is underpinned by a love for God and neighbour. For some time now, there has been a plea that the public are being confused by the messaging on Covid 19. The impact is less that it could be because the messages are too complex, change too often, differ from one part of the country to the other and however well intentioned are easily misunderstood. Jesus' message was simple

– love God, love neighbour – but actually, if implemented it is very wide ranging. (By the way we are not to hate ourselves or be too hard on ourselves – we are to love others as we love ourselves). There is a place for taking good care of ourselves in body, mind and soul. If we don't, then we'll struggle to love our neighbours as God intends. We aren't machines – we all need to attend to our own needs and be open to seek support and encouragement from God and neighbour and if need be – from doctor or health professional too! So, let's not hear any talk that WE don't matter. Remember, God loves each and every one of us – and longs to make his home in us, and to use us to further his kingdom – and share in his ministry. But for us to achieve anything for the kingdom we'll need to look after ourselves and allow others to play their part in our care too. I'm the kind of person who, if I don't say it, probably think it "I'm fine thanks and will manage". But I will be honest, I've found myself more in need of support, more in need of encouragement and rest, more "not fine" this year than ever before – and not just in the middle of the tight lockdown – I've been more aware of my own limitations in recent weeks than before – and I don't think I am alone. Our energy is being sapped, our resilience put to the test. I can't do everything and nor can you. So, yes it's ok to be not ok. It's absolutely fine, to admit that you're not fine. Well, I'm faring pretty well and I have a lot of support and folks rooting for me, and I know that God is with me – but I am not invincible – and I can't meet all my own expectations never mind everything that others expect from me – so be warned – I won't be able to do it all. I will need to say No sometimes and I will need to be stricter in taking a rest and time off. And that is NORMAL – so you probably need to be thinking along these lines too. I remember a talk by a Christian Psychiatrist Dr Monty Barker from Glasgow speaking at a student

conference in Swanwick over 40 years ago, alongside John Stott and Jim Packer (not a bad line up!) – stress is fine within limitations, stress in the ministry is to be expected. Indeed in life. If we aren't under strain some of the time we probably aren't doing our job properly. But it's like elastic – it's made to stretch, that's its job – but overstretch it too far or keep it stretched too long and it will fail and become unable to cope. There's not too much I can remember in detail from 40 odd years ago but that is a lesson I remember – and one that has been more important this year than ever before. I can't be alone. The fridge magnet “I am a woman, I am invincible, I am tired” makes a lot of sense to me – and I am just a man! So, yes I'm fine – but I'm tired and I will continue to work to my limitations – and seek to take time off and look after myself – for your sake and God's sake. So please, loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves presupposes a willingness to look after ourselves – and to allow others, and God, to love and care for us – and that goes for you as well as me!

Love God

My grandmother who used to say about her age “I was Young before I married” – because that was her maiden name, sometimes described herself as “hinging the gither”. That could be “just hinging the gither” but more often than not she meant that without everything being dandy – life was what it was, and that its constituent parts were in balance as much as they reasonably could be, at least to the extent she could influence them. Jesus' teaching in this passage has to do with a life that is integrated, fits together, complements and interacts in its different aspects in a positive way. And if we can grasp that, then we will more likely be in harmony with his purposes, and more effective in his service. Loving God, loving neighbour even loving self are all part of the commandment,

all part of God's loving purposes for us and his people. We can't set love for God over against our love for neighbour or ourselves. We can't really set love for neighbour against a proper love for God or ourselves either. Yes, we could be super spiritual and tick all the religious boxes we could possibly come up with – but if that doesn't spill over into loving care towards our neighbour then it is both pointless and unreal. And given human nature our ability to love our neighbour in our own strength without God's grace and blessing is almost certain to falter and run dry. Without being self-centred and ignoring God or neighbour we need to take proper care of ourselves if we are to be of use to either God or neighbour. As in mathematics so in life, integration is more difficult than differentiation but we need to see how love for God isn't boxed-in religion, if it is real then it will spill out into love for neighbour and will be of a quality that resembles most people's priority to look after No 1. Let's see what Jesus was getting at - that loving God, neighbour and self is part of God's loving plan for us to be in sync – to be in harmony - with love the cohesion and the purpose, all embracing, all supporting, energising and resulting in life in all its fullness. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbour as your love yourself – not so much as a commandment, an order but as an invitation to receive the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of his Spirit to make it happen.

Harvest and neighbours

We haven't been able to celebrate a proper Harvest Thanksgiving this year but I want us to reflect something of thanks towards God – yes for the harvest of food from the fields and all the efforts of people in the food supply chain, made all the more difficult because of the restrictions but thanks too for his abiding and upholding love to us all throughout

these dark months of the virus pandemic – and his promise to with us through the winter and indeed through life whatever that will hold. But can I make a plea – arising from the passage this morning – let’s not be too limited in our definition of neighbour? Friend or foe, local or far afield, our neighbour is anyone in need, anyone who needs our love. The temptation is to pull up the drawbridge when things are tough and seek to defend our own interests. Humanly speaking that is a mistake, and it is certainly contrary to what God intends. Our neighbour may share the same postcode as us but they may live in a country and context far removed from DD10 – but they are fellow human beings, folk whom Christ loves – and we are called to love them as we love ourselves, for the love of God in Christ. Foodbanks, aid agencies, campaigning for justice and peace, being generous as we are able, certainly praying near and far – these are all part of what it means to love God and our neighbour as we love ourselves. What a harvest of love there could yet be in the world if we all took Jesus at his word and sought his help to live out his kind of love.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.