

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October Last Sunday after Trinity

Matt 22:34-end 1 Thess 2:1-8

**1 thessalonians 2:1-8** You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully maltreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

**Matthew 22:34-end The Greatest**

**Commandment** When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

**The Question about David's Son** Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet' "? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

**Sermon:** The context and the timing of our Gospel passage today is important - and this is because the extract we heard takes place following Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and so we're in the very last week of Jesus' earthly ministry: there are some really important things left for Jesus to say and teach, and the Pharisees ask Jesus the kind of questions which I think they're hoping will 'corner' him and catch him out. Judging by the questions that they ask him, it's almost as if they thought he wouldn't know the Jewish Law well enough to answer: 'Teacher', they ask him, 'which commandment in the law is the greatest?' Had they somehow forgotten that Jesus was a Jew? And knew the Law and the prophets which he'd been speaking of for 3 years? In asking him this question, and by his answers, the Pharisees have inadvertently given Jesus a platform in which to state, during this final week of his life,

the two most fundamentally important issues for humanity – not just of course answers which become the very basis of human life for those who call themselves Christians, but answers which I believe are the basis of all human life, everywhere, and for all people: If, as we say, that all people are created by God and for God, in his image, and that from Him every person on earth is named, then the command to love God our creator with all of our human heart is surely fundamental to life itself. We cannot but love the God who made us, and love Him for giving us life. Furthermore, it is unsurprising that the command to love thy neighbour is not at all exclusive to the Christian faith: it is the 'golden rule' for many faiths and for many people I know, of no faith.

The challenges here then are both universal and transcend the matter of time; they are historic and forward looking, timeless – for those of all kinds of faiths, and those who say they don't have a faith. And so I find it ironic that in trying to catch Jesus out the Pharisees have inadvertently handed Jesus the opportunity to state these two all-important commandments for all time and for all humanity.

For us then, as Christians today, these are absolutely fundamental issues which we have to try to abide by, and as such, today's gospel extract holds up a mirror to us, its readers:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself.

In preparing for today, I was mindful that these words have been spoken of, and preached on for thousands of years, and so a slight anxiety as I pondered what is it that God would have me say about these words today? My thoughts led me to mostly reflecting on the second of these two greatest commandments, and so that's what I'm going to focus on initially:

Jesus said: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

Well, it's all too easy isn't it, to say yes, we do that; we love our neighbours, those we live in the same street as and those who perhaps live a little further away. But I think for the kind of world we live in today, our neighbour actually means everyone, everyone in the world, in a much more global way than those who are just geographically nearer to us.

These days, there's really not much of an excuse for not knowing about our sisters and brothers all over the world, and especially those who may be in need a very long way away from us. We can't really today just pretend that our neighbours are those who live close by. And that tests us in all sorts of ways.

It means of course that we have to love everyone and anyone – whatever language they speak, whatever skin colour they have, whatever cultural differences there are, whatever education they may or may not have had - love without prejudice, without discrimination, without judgement of any kind.

If we are truly to reflect the teaching of Jesus, and truly love our neighbour, then the only option is unconditional love for every sister and every brother living in this world, regardless of who they are, how they behave, or what they do, or what they don't do.

But it's more than that, regardless of who our neighbour is, because genuine love for our neighbour means not just being outwardly caring, kind and compassionate, but also demands of us as Christians that we really do, inwardly also, deep inside ourselves, have that same love and compassion that sometimes we're can so readily and easily display.

I want to tell you a very short story. It culminates in the need to hold that mirror that I mentioned a few moments ago, up to ourselves – and ask ourselves do we really love our neighbour, not just outwardly, but also inwardly, and privately? Do we put conditions on people and therefore judge them?

A friend of mine was house sitting for some mutual friends. The couple whose house it was were well respected in our church; this was a very long time ago and a very long way away from here and, well, may they and I would just laugh about this these days, but there's a serious side to it. My friend who was house sitting loved books, and as he was browsing their bookcases, thumbed through one of the books, and inside, like a bookmark, was a written list, a Christmas card list, you know the kind of thing, a list of names – who'd sent them a card, and who they were sending to, and so on.

I always gave them a Christmas card, and so my name was on the list as having sent to them, but unfortunately the word written in brackets next to my name, was - 'late'.

I love this story, not just because it's so funny, but I also think it's fairly outrageous. It wasn't good enough just to send good Christmas wishes to some fellow Christians, but there were expectations and conditions attached.

I wonder: do we all on occasions attach conditions and expectations on our friendships and relationships? Or are we content that people just do their best? Perhaps this story holds up a mirror to us all; it does to me. Do we sometimes pretend that we care and love unconditionally, and have compassion, unconditionally, or do we place conditions on our relationships with others?

Do we have expectations about others' behaviour, which then has an effect on how we view them, or judge them, or treat them, or label them?

Jesus' love for people – all people - was absolutely unconditional. It depended on nothing at all, nothing whatsoever, other than their turning to him in need and trying to trust him. I cannot imagine a Jesus who behind closed doors, away from the neighbours, or behind the flap of his tent, or behind the columns in the temple, behaved any differently to how he behaved in public. I think we imagine Jesus to not have labelled people or judged people – but instead just as someone who loved, without expectations, without conditions. This is the kind of love he expects from us – a love which is the same regardless of who is looking or who is not.

The people of the church have a hard task on their hands, to reverse any kind of conditional love that may have been prevalent in the past, and convert that to a love and care which refutes any kind of conditions – a love which cuts right through any discrimination, cuts right through differentiation, cuts through judgements, expectations and conditions.

Behind our own closed doors, in the privacy of our own homes, are things sometimes a little different in our attitudes of neighbourly towards others? I'm asking myself this question, as much as I'm asking all of us. Is our care and love for others both outwardly and inwardly unconditional?

Any of us who grew up with conditions being placed on the parental that was offered, will know exactly what I mean – and I've always known, once I became a parent myself, that it was an all- important calling on my life to love my children with no conditions whatsoever being placed on the giving of love. True love for the other places no conditions upon them.

If you are someone who grew up with conditions placed on you, know today that you are loved – you are beloved of God. If you're in any doubt,

you may want to meditate on Psalm 139:  
'before I was formed, your eyes could see my embryo. I am fearfully and wonderfully made', and so on. If you feel unloved by your neighbour, meditate on these words and know that nothing and no-one can ever separate you from God's love.

And so as Jesus had 'set his face' towards Jerusalem, in those final phases of his earthly life, so perhaps we may want to set our faces before that mirror I mentioned, and do a check-in; am I reflecting the love that God has for me to others; am I placing conditions on others, or am I loving unconditionally?