

Matthew 22 34-46
The great commandment, and the great misunderstanding

Remembrance Sunday calls for a bit more in the way of formality. I don't know whether people have noticed, but I've been using pretty much the same order of service for the last few years, including mostly the same songs, even. It's not that there's anything wrong with variety, or anything wrong in saying or doing things spontaneously, but some things just need that extra bit of what we call *decorum*.

Just mentioning that word suddenly takes me back to a poem I remembered one line of from schooldays. Must have come across it in an English class, but the title and the last line of the poem was actually in Latin. Maybe some of you have come across it, too? **Wilfrid Owen's**

Dulce et decorum est

... pro patria mori

And he calls it "the old lie": that, to give the translation, "**it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country**". He knew that trench warfare was nothing gleaming and glorious. These, by contrast, are the *starting words* of the poem:

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,*

So that's something that we need these moments of quiet and formality to just call to mind, and get into proportion. We don't ever dare forget that war is awful. There may be times when it is necessary, and there may well be acts of true heroism, too, that wouldn't have otherwise happened. But it's very appropriate, at a time like this, to remember that verse from the Bible that says:

"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

(John 15:13)

And that is hugely topical, when you come to that Bible reading we just had from Matthew's Gospel. Those questions batted to and fro were spoken just a couple of days before that was precisely what Jesus did: laid down his life for his friends. That's what he is primarily talking about there, and we're rather hijacking it if we end up thinking it's mainly here to use on Remembrance Sundays.

. And there's something else topical in what we read earlier, if we're talking about words that are spoken regularly. *Jesus* in his answer quotes words that faithful Jews down through the centuries have said *every day*, never mind once every year:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

(Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Repeated words, if they're well chosen, can be very profound - as Jesus here states they are. We've been going through this section of Matthew's Gospel here recently, and I thought that for once it would make sense, with such important stuff as this in front of us, to just carry on with the series. I've already mentioned the background of it being just a couple of days before the crucifixion. We just need to remind ourselves of the precise location and what is going on, too.

So all of this is happening in the Jewish temple, that centrepiece of their religion. And all the leaders of all the various Jewish factions are none too keen to have this remarkable young rabbi teaching there - publicly undermining them, they will have been thinking.

And various groups have been coming up to Jesus to do verbal battle with him. Here, for example, at the start of this section:

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

(Matthew 21:23)

There's no time to go over the various discussions and arguments again now, but just take it as read that there have been several rounds of these already. Finally, Jesus' old opponents, the Pharisees, draw in for a final bout.

But 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.

(Matthew 22:34-35)

It looks like one last **roll of the dice**. And maybe they have deliberately chosen one of their experts in the Jewish Law, thinking that he is now their best chance to trip up Jesus in his speaking - hoping, finally, that the **enough rope to hang himself** will actually result in him saying something he can be publicly condemned for ... just by *someone*. Because, let's face it, everyone can have their own take on which is the most important of the Ten Commandments, can't they? Jesus has *got* to anger someone by his answer, doesn't he?

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

(Matthew 22:36)

It's almost, ***Pick a number between one and ten!*** ... and lose 90% of your audience! But, as I'm sure we're used to seeing now, Jesus *doesn't* follow the predictable track ... or any one of the ten of them. Initially, you might think that he is going **off-piste** again. But ... not when you hear what he makes of this.

And yet nobody can argue with this. As Jesus starts to recite these words, everyone around him will join in. These words are their national heritage. This is who they are ... and who their God is. This is totally THEM.

And 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 great and first commandment.”

(Matthew 22:37-38)

Do you see the amazing wisdom of that? *Nobody* could contradict him when he gives *this* answer, of all answers. And then he couples to it a verse from a different place in the Law, but giving a total balance to it all.

“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

(Matthew 22:39)

And finally, to round it all off, a claim which includes all the other hundreds of commandments, however they had been classified by generations of Jewish scholars to be heavier or lighter matters of the Law, *all* of them, says Jesus ...

“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

(Matthew 22:40)

That word “depend” is very simple and literal. It’s the word for hanging - like you would soon talk about the **decorations** or the presents *hanging* on the Christmas tree. All of the commandments, says Jesus, fit smoothly and snugly somewhere into the defined context of these two commandments.

So you could say that Jesus has not just identified which **star** is to sit on top of the Christmas tree, but he has pretty much defined where every one of those **decorations** on the tree sits in relation to one another, at the same time.

I’d just like to make a few quick points about this before moving on that curious last paragraph that might have confused you a bit. Because just remember what I called this talk today: **The great commandment, and the great misunderstanding**. There are some things we can get terribly *wrong* here.

Three why?s

Why *love*?

Why *commandments*?

Why this isn’t *three* commandments

- **Why *love*?**

Did it strike you that *both* parts of Jesus’ answer feature love: *love* God, and *love* your neighbour? Doesn’t that have to be significant? It’s got to be more than a coincidence.

I wonder if that's because it is something to do with God himself. There are two big short statements that God makes about himself in the pages of the Bible:

... God is love ...

(1 John 4:8,16)

... God is light...

(1 John 1:5)

And both of those have parallel consequences. Because God is light, then ...

... for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ...

(Ephesians 5:8)

The people of God must start to show some of the nature of God. There's supposed to be family likeness becoming evident. And while it could just say, "Walk as children of love", too, just paralleling what we've got here, I'm not sure that either of them is really easy to explain in practical terms.

But an explanation of *light* in terms of healthy, health-giving, upright living is fairly straightforward. Whereas love could just be thought of as a nice, internal, fuzzy warm emotion. We can just feel we are loving people ... but without actually showing anything much in practical terms. So perhaps it needs to be spelled out here. You can light up an area, but you can't *love* up an area. The object of love has to be relational. So ...

The first priority, says Jesus, and with every part of your being:

And 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."

(Matthew 22:37)

But flip that question over, and it becomes a different one, also worth thinking about. You can't just force or command love. It doesn't happen that way. So how come *love* features here as part of a command? Maybe we should expand and rephrase that "Why". Instead of just making it sound like an arbitrary demand, what about thinking in terms of "What do I know, or have I experienced, that would lead me to love God more intensely?" And I can show you an answer to that from Jesus' own words.

Luke 7:36-49

For the people of Jesus' day, the question was how Jesus dared to say he could forgive sins. For the people of our day, the question is how Jesus would dare to say that we have sins that need to be forgiven - and especially so serious that it must be by means of the death of Jesus on the cross.

But ... if he loved us THAT much ... if we have sinned and it takes THAT to forgive us ... how is any love less than that ferocity of *all* your heart and *all* your soul and *all* your mind and *all* your strength an appropriate response?

- **Why commandments?**

But why commandments? If Jesus says it's all about loving God and loving our neighbour, why are there still rules of any kind? Just one quick thought on this for you.

From time to time I still occasionally meet people who tell me they are really not bothered with all of the Bible. They would just prefer to cut it down to the key bits. They say that for them, it's fine to "just live by the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount".

It's tempting to ask if they've ever really read either, or reflected upon them in any detail at all. But I think I'd also be tempted to bring them to this line of Jesus'. They are implying that the Ten Commandments are keepable. They are saying that the Sermon on the Mount can be followed through and lived out adequately. But when you're faced with ...

And 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."

(Matthew 22:37)

... isn't it finally clear that we cannot keep the standards that God sets? It is impossible to claim that you have done *this*, you are doing *this*, and you will continue to do *this* in order to put yourself right with God. Honestly, can any of us say we feel we have even managed to make anything of a start on the enormity of this commandment that Jesus says sums up all the commandments ... never mind making any inroads on the one about our neighbour?

Folks, instead, doesn't this just show us unmistakably we need Jesus Christ not just as teacher, but as *Saviour* - Saviour from our sin of not loving God as much as he desires and rightfully demands?

So why commandments at all, you can still ask? Two things, very quickly:

If God says *Do this ... or don't do that*, that can show us something about himself. If he says we are to be fair in trading with other people, we come to understand more of what it means when we read ...

"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."

(Deuteronomy 32:4)

So we learn something about his character on the divine scale by living it out on our human scale.

And, second, we have the opportunity to show our love for God *by* keeping his commandments. Just like Jesus said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

(John 14:15)

- **Why this isn't *three* commandments**

I just think I don't dare pass this by without mentioning something that I think is a serious snare to people nowadays. Remember that we live in a world that is already self-obsessed. **THIS IS ME!!** And when that world hits these two commandments, it tries to tweak this second one, in particular, to make a third.

Aren't we told here, isn't it implied ... aren't we *commanded*, even, to love *ourselves* too? The reasoning goes that if we are to love others as we love ourselves, we have to love ourselves to start with. What do you make of that supposed logic?

I'd like us to go into this in more detail this evening, but here's one basic preliminary thought that will apply to both the "I have to love myself" and the "I have to forgive myself" snares. They don't go deep enough. They aren't grounded enough. They do not touch their foot down on **solid ground** enough.

So if I say that "I have to love myself" or "I have to forgive myself", I'm making myself the arbiter of what is loveable and what is forgivable. I'm deciding whether, today, I am worthy of love, or I have earned forgiveness. But what if, tomorrow, I change my mind again? When were you right, when you *did* love yourself, or when you *didn't*, when you thought you could finally forgive yourself, or now when you have decided to retract that?

What we actually need is what the Bible calls

... a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul ...

(Hebrews 6:19)

and we don't get it by looking inside ourselves. We get it by looking to Jesus Christ. So it's not a question of whether I feel I should extend love towards myself today. Instead, words like this - from the OT, but they certainly point me to Jesus - can bring us hope:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; ...”

(Isaiah 49:15-16)

And do I dare forgive myself again, if I wake up just feeling overwhelmed by guilt again? Instead, here is far better ground to stand upon:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

“What God has made clean, do not call common.”

(Acts 10:15)

If God has said that this can be forgiven, it is a question of *How DARE I say otherwise!*

But look, I said about **the great commandment, and the great misunderstanding**. We’ve looked at some smaller misunderstandings. Just look now at the last few verses of the passage, and see the biggest one of the lot that these Pharisees made. They did not have a big enough picture of Jesus himself.

It kicks off with Jesus taking the initiative, asking an apparently simple question.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”

(Matthew 22:41-42)

“Gathered together” might mean some more formal meeting, rather than just hanging around at the end of the previous exchange. So this seems to be a very pointed attack by Jesus now. But it’s not a tricky question, is it? We might even be able to answer this ourselves, if we remember it’s Christmas coming up soon.

They said to him, “The son of David.”

(Matthew 22:42)

They hadn’t been too happy, a couple of days earlier, with the local kids singing this about Jesus. But this will take their unhappiness to a new level now! Here’s a real poser. It’s a bit like one of those **Escher** pictures, where things seem to connect all wrong. He quotes some Scripture, but how does *this* tie up? *“The son of David”, you say ... but, in that case ...*

He said to them, “How is it then that David, in 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””?

(Matthew 22:43-44)

In case you don’t quite follow the logic of that, here’s the bottom line:

“If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?”

(Matthew 22:45)

There’s David, and the “Son of David” ... sort of code-name for the Messiah. In Jewish thinking, the father is always greater than the son. So David is greater

than the Messiah. But David also calls him “Lord” ... so the Messiah must be greater than David, too. That’s odd!

Folks, who is this “Son of David”? It was the name that was proclaimed over Jesus when he entered Jerusalem ... but the people had in mind only some kind of political liberator from Roman rule: a leader, but a *lesser* figure than David. But Jesus challenges these Pharisees on this point. Don’t the Scriptures say that Jesus is greater than this? Not just David’s “son”, which he also is, but David’s *Lord*?

Folks, can we make precisely the same mistake about Jesus? We can read the Great Commandment, but still buy into the Great Misunderstanding: a Jesus who is just not big enough.

A Jesus who is just an awesome teacher.

A Jesus who is just a revolutionary leader.

A Jesus who is just a wonderful example.

A Jesus who just lays down his life for his friends ... but we neglect to even consider that he could, literally, historically, rise from death on the third day.

A Jesus who is “the Son of David”, but not his Lord.

And therefore a Jesus that you’re happy, at Christmas Time, to sing about, born “once in royal David’s city” ... for where else would the Son of David be born?

But as regards a Jesus, who

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

(Luke 1:32-33)

Well, that’s a different story ...

... or is it?