Sermon on Sunday 25 October 2026
by Rev. Scott Martin

Matthew 22. 34-46

Our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning takes place within the context of a controversy in the temple, where religious leaders have repeatedly attempted to trap Jesus. The Pharisees have come together to challenge Jesus after hearing that he has recently silenced the challenges of the Sadducees. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asks Jesus a question to test him: "Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" The question itself is a legitimate one in Jewish tradition, but the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is stressing the **hostile intent** behind the question! He wants to share the insight that it is possible to discuss God's commandments, whilst at the same time acting against the practice of love that they require.

In answer to the lawyer's question, Jesus quotes the Shema from chapter 6 of Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind". This command is foundational in Jewish life, it is a command that is recited daily, worn in phylacteries on the head or arm, and is also posted on doorposts. The emphasis on the word **ALL** in this commandment is, of course, to teach that the heart, the soul, and the mind are not separate compartments, but make up the whole self; the centre of understanding, will and life. Loving the Lord is not just about sentiment, but the devotion of the whole person, expressed in loving obedience. This is the greatest and first commandment. But, of course, it does not end there. Jesus goes on to emphasise a second commandment that is like the first. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." With this second commandment, Jesus is

quoting Leviticus 19:18. Leviticus defines love by way of actions; justice, honesty, fairness, refusing vengeance, protecting the vulnerable.

So, alongside the love of God, Jesus places the importance of the love of neighbour. In other words, the two commandments are like each other, they are interrelated. To love God with our hearts, our souls and our minds, is inextricably bound up, not with a vague niceness towards our neighbours, but ethical action towards real people. And, in fact, if we look at this text a bit more closely, it goes even deeper than that.

The second commandment ***you shall love your neighbour as yourself,*** is better understood as ***you shall love your neighbour as BEING yourself!*** The second commandment is often mistranslated or misunderstood as meaning ***you shall love your neighbour AS MUCH as you love yourself***, which can in fact destroy the force of the statement. How much we love ourselves is not the standard by which Christ is calling us to love others. Rather, we are called to love our neighbour in recognising their ***being of the same nature*** as we are ourselves, as being created in God's image and likeness, just as we are. We find our true selves, by loving God with all that we have, **and** in loving our neighbour, whose divine image and nature we share. On these two commandments says Jesus, hang all the Law and the Prophets.

So, in many ways, we are being shown that the love of God is the support structure for interpreting every other command. If an interpretation leads away from love of God or neighbour, it must be re-examined. Just now, I mentioned how the second commandment of loving our neighbour, emphasised the importance of **recognising** their being of the same nature as

we are ourselves. The word **recognise** is of some considerable significance here. The word itself is a verb that comes from the Latin root ***recognoscere***, which means "to know again" or "to recall." In what ways could that understanding of the word *recognise* influence our own discipleship and how we view our neighbours?

Living as we do in a culture that seems to struggle at times to find a collective narrative that holds us together as a society, we should look again at Jesus' emphasis on what loving our neighbour as ourselves really means. The values that help us survive a market narrative may in some ways be necessary; the promotion of self-empowerment, freedom understood as raw consumer choice etc, but those somewhat self-protecting values may cause a form of blinkered blindness not just to the needs of my neighbour, but to who and what I actually understand my neighbour to be. It is not a dreadful thing to ask ourselves from time to time the question: "When I encounter a fellow human being, do I fully appreciate the reality, the mystery, which is standing before me?"

It is here that the word *recognise* comes into play. In order for us to truly recognise our neighbour, whether that neighbour is a colleague, a stranger in my town or a seeker of asylum and protection, as a disciple of Christ, I'm invited to "know again" or to "recall" those words found in the first chapter of Genesis; "Then God Said, 'Let Us make humankind in Our image, according to Our likeness'…." And out of that Christ commands us, "you Shall love your neighbour as being yourself." The love of my neighbour starts with recognition. Whether that love is being enacted in the smallest or grandest of sacrificial gestures, I am called to recognise that my neighbour is, like me, one made in the image of God. Like me, my neighbour is a mystery,

a creature joyfully and painfully unfolding within history at the invitation of a loving creator, who invites us into being, to grow in the image of the divine.

In the second half of our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees by asking them a question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son, is he?” It is important to remember, that Jesus is speaking here about the idea of the expected Messiah of Israel. The Pharisees respond that the Messiah is or will be the Son of David, a past King of Israel. Jesus, insightfully asks the question, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord?” Jesus continues by citing Psalm 110 “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”? Jesus asks this question to lead the Pharisees to the only logical conclusion. If King David addresses the Messiah as Lord, how can the Messiah also be his son? Jesus’ purpose here is to broaden the horizon of the Pharisees’ understanding of the Messiah beyond purely political expectations.

Jesus does this to reveal that the Messiah, the Christ, is both human and divine – David’s son is David’s Lord who has existed from all eternity. In revealing this, Jesus shows how in him, love and lordship are from the same source of all things. The Pharisees, of course, do not attempt to answer the question, because they realise the implications and are afraid to confess Jesus as the Son of God.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbour as a being just like you; whose nature you share. When Jesus says that on these commandments **hang** all the law and the prophets, it is no coincidence that the same verb “hang” also

appears in the crucifixion texts of the Gospels. The one who teaches that the meaning of Scripture hangs on the love and Lordship of the Lord of Life, is himself hung on a cross. The tree that led to the falling away of humanity, in the garden Eden, becomes the cross and tree of victory from which the resurrection conquers sin and death, fulfilling the law and the prophets.

We have reflected this morning on how the call to love God, with all that we have, with all that we are, is totally bound up with the love of our neighbour. To recognise the divine image within ourselves, the invitation to grow in God's likeness, is a call to serve that same image in others, just as Christ himself came to serve. The love of God has been described as ***causeless grace***. Causeless grace means love without a cause. It is not the result of a decision, it is not a reaction to something, it is the pure outflowing gift of a God who loves, because that is the very nature of the one who holds all things in being.

St. Irenaeus wrote in the second century that, "The glory of God, is a living human being… in other words, humanity." Not a humanity that never breaks the rules, or is perfect, or who has all the answers, but the sheer fact of living human beings. It is quite an amazing phenomenon to think that within each one of us, the universe is awake and conscious of itself. Let us pray that we never take that astounding fact for granted. Let us praise and love God for it, and in doing so, may we never forget to recognise and love his image in each other.

Amen.