

**Focus Reading:** Matthew 22. 34-40

<sup>34</sup> When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,<sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ <sup>37</sup> 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.’” <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: “‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Holy God open our ears to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today and always. Amen.

Today’s Gospel reading has many facets. It begins with the Pharisees trying to compromise Jesus, as they had attempted to do many times in the past. They were determined to trap him into declaring he was the Son of God and therefore, by his own admission, a heretic. They could do something about a heretic, but they couldn’t do much about this itinerant preacher and teacher who was fast gaining popularity, unless he discredited himself.

So they asked him ‘which commandment in the law is the greatest?’

Jesus’ response was both typical and not. He begins his response in a rather predictable way: “‘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.”

Here, Jesus is quoting a well-known piece of scripture, the Shema from Deuteronomy. Words that the Pharisees had engrained in their own hearts and that couldn’t be challenged.

Jesus then goes on to say there is a second commandment – to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Jesus tells the Pharisees that all the “law and the prophets,” the two major bodies of text that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, are dependent upon these two commandments. He effectively summarized thousands of years of Jewish teaching into two sentences. His words replace the old Mosaic Law with a new understanding.

His response essentially says to the Pharisees ‘No longer do you need to spend hours, days, weeks and years defining what the law means, now you have two simple and all-encompassing statements. Before all else, every thought and action made or contemplated, the first response is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love your neighbour as you love yourself. This news was quite a shock for those who had devoted their lives to interpreting the law, a law that often excluded people because they didn’t observe the fine print.

At first glance, what Jesus was proposing wasn’t unreasonable. God created humanity out of love to be loved and to love in return. However, humanity didn’t have the most wonderful track record. Love was often conditional. How could humanity love itself, let alone others,

when people were constantly being told they were falling short of expectations, and whose expectations were they? What Jesus was proposing was actually quite challenging, then and now.

I have thought a lot about love these past weeks. For me, this is a time of year when I remember a number of people who have had a significant impact on my life, but now rest in God's care. People who have loved me, despite my frailty and faults. People who showed me how to love, self and others.

When I encounter this Gospel passage, I often find myself pondering how powerful and profound love can be.

Today, I would like to share two personal experiences of love with you. Both quite different, but for me, both profound and life changing.

The first situation happened one Sunday afternoon many years ago. I experienced a very effective lesson in comprehending God's love. It is a lesson that, in its simplicity, has stayed with me all these years.

Children, parents and people involved in children's ministry had gathered for a Children's Service. A Church Army officer led the service. It was awesome. We had a couple of hundred children and almost as many adults participate in an afternoon of music, activity and learning, a little like Messy Church but on a huge scale. The teaching left a lasting impression. It wasn't a sermon as such, rather three short talks, each building on the previous one.

The preacher started by talking about distance (I have changed the places to suit Australian air travel pre Covid 19). He spoke about how long it would take to fly from Adelaide to Melbourne, then Melbourne to Brisbane, Brisbane to Darwin and Darwin to Perth. He then crossed international borders. How long would it take to fly from Perth to Singapore, Singapore to Rome, Rome to UK all in a jumbo jet.

The second segment went even further. How long would it take to fly from the earth to the moon, to the sun, and some of the outlying planets.

The third segment went even further. How long would it take to travel to the furthest reaches of the known universe. By this time, we were into billions of years of travel – all on a jumbo jet.

And then the conversation changed. The preacher spoke of our God who created this universe. A God so great that he could hold this universe in the palm of his hand. At that point he took a marble out of his pocket as a demonstration of just how big God was in comparison to the universe, it was a normal sized glass marble. He reminded us that we are part of that universe, and even though our existence is smaller than a grain of sand, when compared to a marble, we too are held, very intentionally in the palm of God's hand.

Imagine you are holding a marble. Wrap your hand around it. The longer you hold it the warmer it gets.

The longer God holds us the warmer our relationship with God grows. Have you allowed God to get that close?

Now translate that into your life. Figuratively speaking, when did you last hold someone in the palm of your hand? Did you hold them long enough to enable them to grow warm in your care? In that caring, were you able to tell them just how much God loved them? What an amazing lesson in understanding how much God loves us.

But it didn't stop there.

About a month later, still with this lesson about God's love lingering in my mind, I experienced another profound expression of outpouring of God's love. A number of local clergy were asked to accompany the Bishop on a formal visit to a local residential psychopaedic Centre. This Centre, the last of its kind in Aotearoa New Zealand, supported approx. 200 residents living with profound disability. We gathered for a unique event, a service of confirmation and blessing.

That day the Bishop confirmed 17 residents, and anointed a further eleven, including two people who couldn't be moved from their ward. The bishop had been warned that one resident would bite him, another scream when he came near - but to please persevere. There was no biting that day, there was no screaming. One resident, when the bishop laid hands on his head in confirmation whooped for joy.

The clergy prayed with the families of the residents and offered anointing which many accepted. This simple act of prayer and anointing offered healing for many damaged families. Families bearing scars that the church inflicted upon them when their differently abled children had been refused baptism because they weren't 'good enough for God'. Those words coming from a previous generation of Anglican clergy.

This was not a confirmation service in the traditional sense of equipping for mission, but it was a profound expression of God's love in action. For many of the residents and their families it was the first time that they had been told that God loved them, and what was more, that we, the Church loved them. Tears flowed freely, offering healing balm to wounded bodies, minds and spirits.

No one attending that service went away untouched. The power of the Holy Spirit was tangible that day. It was a profound outpouring of God's love in action and a seriously humbling privilege for all who attended. I have never since experienced such a real expression of loving our neighbour. It touched and changed me deeply.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

These words of Jesus that we receive as the Great Commandment condensed thousands of years of Jewish teaching into two sentences. But it didn't in any way simplify the intent.

Loving God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving your neighbour as yourself will always be one of the greatest challenges of our faith, however it is a challenge worth pursuing.

And when its feels overwhelming, incomprehensible and impossible, I encourage you to imagine that marble. Amen.