

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost (Matthew 22. 34-40)

Sarah Bachelard

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus 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’.

So beautiful, so familiar. These words summarise the Christian vision of life. They reflect Jesus’ insistence that love of God and love of neighbour cannot be pulled apart, and that love is the fulfilment of the law. Later in Matthew’s gospel, we hear again this radical interconnection of the two loves. Remember the judgement scene in Matthew 25, with people asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?” And the answer: ‘When you did it to the least of these, you did it for me’. It’s there in 1 John too. ‘Those who say, “I love God”, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also’.

So, we recognise the mutuality of these commandments. And we also have at least some sense of what it might mean to ‘love our neighbour as ourselves’. In Luke’s version of this story, the lawyer who puts Jesus to the test asks a follow up question: ‘And who is my neighbour?’ And Jesus replies with the story of the Good Samaritan – who acted as a neighbour to the man who fell among thieves. Love of neighbour, Jesus teaches, is essentially about showing mercy, meeting need, giving

place. However much we struggle at times to respond to one another in these ways, however regularly you and I fail really to treat another *as ourselves*, we at least have an inkling of what is being asked.

But what about love of God? What does that look like? We know it is not separable from loving our neighbours – but nor is it simply *reducible* to loving our neighbours. There are *two* commandments after all. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”.

Notice first that we’re not commanded here to love God in the abstract but to love ‘*the LORD* your God.’ This is, Yahweh, God who has a recorded history; God who addressed Abraham and called him to leave his homeland, who spoke with Moses and the prophets, the God (according to the psalmist) who’s known you before you were born, who called you by name and sought you out – the God who cares and hears and acts. To love *this* God is to love one who first loved us, who initiated loving. Our love is always a *responding*, an answering love. 1 John again: ‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins’ (4. 10).

What then is our response to be? What is an answering love? What does the call to love God, whom we cannot see, actually mean?

I’ve been reading an essay by Rowan Williams this week, called ‘Religious lives’, which I have found really helpful as I’ve pondered this question. Williams points out that, ‘A religious life is a material life’. ‘Living religiously is a way of conducting a bodily life. It has to do with gesture, place, sound, habit’. It’s not, he says, first and foremost about belief, and ‘not first and foremost to do with what is supposed to be going on inside’.¹

That might sound controversial – so let me give an example. A feeling of general benevolence is not the same thing as loving our neighbour. Love is proved

¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Religious Lives’ in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 313.

authentic only when it issues in particular acts of kindness, mercy, and forgiveness, perhaps especially when these cost something, when we are under pressure or when we are hurt. Isaiah Berlin wrote that 'Karl Marx loved the working class ... but ... he could barely stand individual workers', and similarly we can kid ourselves that we 'love the world, the Third world, or the poor very easily' until we meet obnoxious poor people, or until it costs too much.² In the same kind of way, we can think we believe in and love God, that we are well disposed towards God (think of all those surveys which show a large proportion of the population saying they 'believe in God'). But this trust, this love too is only proved authentic, non-imaginary, when it shows up bodily, in practices, in material forms of life that make visible the reality of which we speak. Prime among these authenticating practices, Jesus taught us, is love of creatures – love of neighbour, love of self, love of the natural world. There are others.

Williams draws on the diaries of Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in 1943. Her diaries chronicle the two years leading up to Etty's death, and her extraordinary and unconventional religious conversion – and we might understand a religious conversion as the process of coming to recognise that there is something to be responded to, that 'God' is addressing and loving us. Etty describes her journey as one of 'learning to kneel' and she talks of her physical compulsion, at times, to fall to her knees.³ Her practice of prayer issues in a growing awareness of God's presence, ripening within her, and of the need to keep faith with this presence, a sense of a task to be accepted.

In the transit camp at Westerbork, her task becomes clearer. It is to witness to the atrocities and suffering being inflicted, to care for others, and to do all this in a particular way. She talks about 'making space' for grief and for suffering. Without denying or evading the pain she and others experience, she learns to be with the

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Vol.2, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 415.

³ Williams, 'Religious lives', 314.

reality of suffering and offer it shelter or a habitation, seeking to meet or undergo it without succumbing to hatred or vengefulness. In accepting this work and letting it expand her, she holds open the possibility of different kinds of human relationship and she witnesses to the presence of a reality that is not determined or colonised by what is happening in the camp, a reality somehow free from oppression, fear and violence. And this just is what loving God amounts to, in these circumstances.

Williams talks about her acceptance of a task of 'internal housekeeping for her imagination and emotion' which Etty describes as taking responsibility for God in the situation, safeguarding 'that little piece of God in ourselves'. And it does indeed take all her heart, soul and mind. Williams remarks: 'The religious life ... [takes on] the task of ensuring a habitation for God, a God who ... is visible only when a human life gives place, offers hospitality to God'.⁴ This is far more than setting a good example, or being relentlessly nice. It's the costly work of giving shelter to grief and pain, embodying non-violence, hope and love in the midst of a world which tends always to cast God out.

This is the work of the whole of a life. It's not essentially about warm spiritual feelings, and not about assent to doctrine, but means being turned towards the reality, the love, of God in such a way that we become less and less able to give room to what is not God. Things like grudge bearing, malice, deception, superficiality, fear, fantasies of revenge or self-pity. The Jewish law expresses the recognition that the whole of our bodily life – food, dress, relationships, work, rest, worship, dispute resolution – should bear witness to God, make God visible in the contours of a human life. We miss the point when the law becomes an end in itself, as if successful performance of the law – eating the right food, keeping the Sabbath, and so on – generates some kind of claim on God, some kind of self-righteousness. But if loving God is necessarily expressed in bodily, material life, then we begin to see how such laws were supposed to sustain and express that love.

⁴ Williams, 'Religious lives', 319.

And, for me, the question is ‘what might this look like in my life, in our life’? How much am I making room for God in my daily practice – how much is my life making God visible? What is cluttering the space – or distracting me from awareness of and responsiveness to this deeper reality? And I sense this could have implications for many things – from how much television I watch, to how much I permit myself to entertain chronic anxiety, or wallow in fantasies about getting even, or in dramas and upsets of my own making, from how I use time and money to my fidelity to prayer and friendship. How is the way I live, daily, consistent or not with being given over wholly to the love of God – heart, mind, soul?

I’m not talking about a new rule book. But I am inviting us to take seriously the materiality of the two great commandments. Not only the material expression of loving our neighbour, but the material expression of loving God and so of making God known. I wonder what new possibilities, what truth, might be unlocked, for ourselves and for others, if we were to give ourselves to this?

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