

Love, and back to the beginning
(Matthew 22.34–46)

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Things are tough out there: personal trauma, devastation, wars, climate disaster, economic slowing, and the list goes on. How then are we to live? How do we respond? Assist others personally by engaging, offering support, money, living frugally, prodigally, questioning, writing letters to the paper, lobbying politicians, marching.. praying, meditation.. So how is what we do here at all relevant? Perhaps it is an oasis, a place to feel safe, be challenged, comforted, find like minds, support? A space to worship God in community? Let's see if the reading speaks into this at all.. Here we have a question skilfully answered, then another question this time from Jesus, as usual, always asking, teasing out the depths, inviting me deeper..

More questions for Jesus, the third of three questions; the first from the Pharisees and Herodians, the second from the Sadducees then another from the Pharisees again, trying to find out, 'Who is this Jesus?' Like good Jewish scholars, they liked a Q&A.

The Pharisees this time ask Jesus about the Law of God. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment?"

Fine, except this time, we are at the pointy end. Jesus is heading towards his death. His answers may influence the timing of his arrest. He is very provocative.

So, which is the greatest commandment? If he chooses one above the others, he's stuffed. Why doesn't he say they are all important? He could have said "Of course you already know, even a small child could give you the answer to that one". He could've said all of them are from God, but he didn't. In this exchange, he quoted back to them, the words that they said every day and wore on their foreheads "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart and soul and strength", except, he misquoted it.

In Jewish circles the single most famous verse is the so-called Shema from Deuteronomy 6.

"Shema" is the Hebrew word for "hear" or "listen" and it comes from that verse, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The Shema was and is traditionally recited by every Jewish child and adult at the start of each day and end of each day. In other words, there was no single verse from the entire Torah that the average Jew knew better than this one.¹

So when Jesus responds to the Pharisees' tricky question by quoting a portion of the Shema, he was throwing back in their faces something they took to be exceedingly basic, something that was second-nature to even the youngest Jewish child. In reflecting on this story, Scott Hoezee quotes the Theologian, Karl Barth who is said to have been asked what he thought was the most profound of all theological truths. Instead of giving some jargon-laden, academic answer he simply said, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." What a simple disarming answer. Barth said, "The greatest truth is the one you already know, the one all Christians know, the one a three-year

¹ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-10-23/matthew-2234-46/>
Scott Hoezee

old can sing about.” In Jesus’ case, he was showing that the Pharisees were not really interested in seeing if Jesus could answer their question since even the youngest person there knew that answer already.² Something else was going on here.

Every Jewish child would then notice that Jesus changed 'strength' to 'mind', 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.'

What’s going on here is Jesus pointing out to these thinkers, these scholars, that all their thinking and study belongs to God, and needs to have the divine in mind, and love. I guess they must’ve been a bit puzzled, and then he goes on, and love your neighbour as yourself. They can’t fault that. All the commandments refer to either Loving God, or Loving your neighbour. He has spoken with truth and authority. There is no comeback. So, what's important is love.

But Jesus, as is his want, then asked them a question of his own, quoting from Psalm 110. 'If the Messiah is a descendent of David, how come David calls him, Lord'. How come David acknowledges something more. If we read between the lines we get the sense that Jesus is talking about himself, without saying so. He is telling the questioners who he is.

Matthews gospel begins with a genealogy of all the people that came before Jesus in his lineage. It is not a traditional genealogy. It includes women, prostitutes and outsiders, and it ends with calling Joseph, not Jesus' father, as you'd expect, but Mary's husband.³

Surprising. Matthew is again telling us something about Jesus, and we have gone back to the beginning. He's saying that Jesus is something more than just a descendant of David. He's the long awaited one.

At the beginning of Jesus ministry he goes into the wilderness and faces three temptations. Now, as Jesus is only a day or two away from being arrested and killed, his ministry concludes with three other tests that come in the form of these three questions.

Three temptations. Three tests. They bookend Jesus’ public ministry.

Matthew is wrapping things up nicely so what are we to make of this text?

We can marvel at Jesus getting himself out of a tough spot? Or or we could reflect more on his answer to love God and love neighbour..

What does that mean today in the midst of the crises we face?

Love GOD. Which God? How? Do we go with the prophet Micah

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

Do we meditate and listen? Do we bring our cries and our wailing before God? And of course our thankyou, or all of the above?

And then there is the second part of Jesus' answer. 'love your neighbour as yourself', which we as Christians take alongside those words in chapter 25 of Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 25:31-40)

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.’

This speaks of the inclusiveness of that love.

² *ibid.*,

³ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-10-23/matthew-2234-46/>
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Now, let's add another dimension to this love talk which we heard at Thursday morning meditation. Jesuit priest, William Johnston, who lived many years in Japan, exploring East and West, wrote:⁴

In the Christian way the basic experience or enlightenment to which all paths lead is that of being loved by God.

This is the theme of the first epistle of St. John, with its ever recurring theme "we love, because God first loved us".

The author keeps reminding us that God took the initiative, that it was not my idea to love God, but rather that my love is an answer to a call or invitation.

In other words, the first thing in Christianity is not my love for God and other people, but my belief that the world is loved by God.

"God is Love", and from this everything else follows.

"God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son....."

From belief in God's love comes a sense of security, an unshakeable faith, that (in the words of Julian of Norwich) "all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be exceedingly well".

It may look all wrong, but all will be well.⁵

There's another idea.

Now, to go further, Benedictus member, Roland Ashby, in his *Living Water* blog, quotes Camaldolese monk Bede Griffiths, who died in India 30 years ago. Ashby says:

Griffiths argued that if humanity was to find healing, redemption and reconciliation it had to go beyond the rational mind, which is inherently dualistic, and the only way to do this, he believed, was through meditation:

"We are being called to recover unity beyond duality as our birthright, and it is this alone which can answer the deepest needs of the world today ... Every religion goes beyond dualism through its mystical tradition.

"This is our calling and our hope. Meditation is the only way to go beyond dualism."

When we go beyond the mind, he says, we "discover the unifying principle behind everything" and that the ultimate Reality is not an impersonal Absolute, but a communion of love.⁶

I think it's about staying engaged, about answering politely, acting with intention and compassion. It's about being present, feeling the pain, taking action where we can, and being aware that we are all one, and that includes all of creation, and when you hurt, I hurt. This is the communion of love Griffiths speaks about.

Ann Miller ended Thursday morning meditation with a quote from a surprising source, Frank Sinatra, (excuse the exclusive language). Sinatra writes

⁴ William Johnston *Silent Music. The science of meditation* Collins 1974

⁵ ibid

⁶<https://www.thelivingwater.com.au/blog/a-radical-change-of-heart-humanitys-only-hope>

"If you don't know the guy on the other side of the world, love him anyway because he's just like you. He has the same dreams, the same hopes and fears. It's one world, pal. We're all neighbours."

For me that is helpful advice!