

In short ?

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Almighty and eternal God,
you have kindled the flame of love
in the hearts of the saints:
grant to us the same faith and power to love,
that, as we rejoice in their triumphs,
we may be sustained by their example and fellowship.

My text can be found in today's gospel from Mark chapter 12 and verse 28:

'Which commandment is the first of all ?'

And so we come to November. The end of Autumn; the beginning of Winter. A time to be wrapped up and warm; a time to be comfortable at home. November is a time for remembering: All Saints; All Souls; Remembrance Day; Christ the King. And on the first Sunday in the run up to Advent, let us remember too what is at the heart of our faith as Christians.

In Mark chapter 12 we have moved on to Jerusalem and the last week of Jesus' life. There, in and around the Temple, the opposition to Jesus and to his teaching has crystallised and the exchanges between him and those who seek to remove him from the scene are sharp and ill-intentioned. In this context, one of the religious experts, a Scribe whose task it is to copy out the sacred scripture asks Jesus a great question which is our text today:

'Which commandment is the first of all ?'

Judaism is a faith with a strong ethical base. The Pharisees' aim was to build a moral framework which would guarantee that their fellow Jews would indeed be a righteous people worthy of their status as the Chosen People of God. In Judaism, there are in fact not just 10 commandments but as many as 613 commandments contained in the first five books of the Bible which are collectively known as the Torah or the Law. So the Scribe, in asking the question, is not simply saying which of the 10 is the most important but which of the 613 is the first of all, is of prime importance.

You all know Jesus' response: 'The first is "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 mind, and with all your strength." The second is this. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.'

Jesus is not being original. He is citing scripture: the first from Deuteronomy 6 v4 & 5; the second from Leviticus 19 v18. His particular gift is to identify two separate passages from scripture that sum up what we should be doing, what it is our duty to do.

And what should we be doing ? Two things. The Scribe has asked Jesus for his opinion on which is the first commandment. Jesus gives him a first and second, the one informing the other so that they are in fact two sides of the same coin and

that coin is love. Love of God is our prime responsibility and out of that love of God comes our love of other people which should embody and reflect our love of ourselves. To love God is to acknowledge our relationship with him; to love our neighbour is to acknowledge our relationship with others which should mirror a proper love of self, that we are all in fact Children of God, made in his image and each of us has intrinsic worth because we in turn are loved.

The great thing about Jesus summary of the Law is that it encapsulates a truth at the heart of our faith in a brief and memorable sound bite: Love God and our neighbour as we love ourselves. The art of précis is to express succinctly the heart of the matter, the essence of a question. Jesus is a master of the essential truth and here is an expression of that truth expressed in a way we can all learn off by heart and to put into practice.

The challenge which the Scribe recognised as authentic is to put our faith into practice. And that, dearly beloved, is the lifework of each one of us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's, Dinard
4th November, 2012*

H: Sermon 26 : In short

