

Leavening Church

Thought for Sunday 25th October (Janice Clark)

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, ³⁵ and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question. ³⁶ “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and the most important commandment. ³⁹ The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

This is one of those Biblical stories that we may be so familiar with that it fails to shock or surprise us any longer. To us, Jesus is simply echoing what we know in our heart of hearts – love God, love your neighbour. It seems so obvious! But it would not have been so to Jesus’ original hearers. These laws were not even part of the 10 commandments. For the scribes and Pharisees and therefore for the people who were taught by them the Law given to Moses from God was sacrosanct. There were 61 mitzvot or laws in the Torah (Jewish Law) but as scholars and rabbis interpreted these according to different times and circumstances, a huge body of oral tradition and oral law began to emerge. In Jesus’ day these unwritten community laws and traditions were beginning to be recorded. And so added to what already existed. And the scribes and rabbis debated at some length about which of these were the most important. The Pharisees concluding that they all were; not one had precedence over another, as they all came from God. So what Jesus is doing is taking his hearers back to first principles. To “love God” (v.37) with heart, soul and mind is a direct echo of the Shema, the fundamental creed of Judaism (see Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The second command Jesus gives, to “love our neighbour”, again reflects the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 19:18).

The law to love your neighbour comes amongst many other laws including such things as not wearing clothing woven from two kinds of material, perverting justice, and going around spreading slander. There are references to various kinds of relationships, within and outside of families. Later on in the same chapter we read: ‘The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners yourself in Egypt.’

So, while many scribes of the time were expanding the legal precepts and making them more detailed (we might think, more complex), Jesus acts to simplify things for the ordinary people. Jesus gives specific emphasis to a law is that is one among many. To love our neighbours as ourselves.

What Jesus did do was to challenge the assumption that rules about ceremonial practices were of equal importance with ethical Law, how we behave to each other. He also sought to end the growing practice of the day of making God’s Law more and more complicated, thus confusing the ordinary people. Simple and succinct was Jesus’ approach. It was these changes that would have surprised Jesus’ audience.