

Mark 12: 28-34

Pymble 4.11.18

Loving the invisible God

This is a tricky sermon today because I want to address one part of 2 things that go together and you might think that I am overlooking the second. It is sort of like apples and peaches. They're both great fruit, but if no one was eating apples I might want to promote the wonders of the apple. And in doing so you might think I'm anti-peaches. But that is not the case. In highlighting the first; I am not denigrating the second.

So today I want to talk about loving God because, as crazy as it sounds, I don't think we hear too much about that these days. We talk a great deal about loving our neighbour, and this is very good. To deepen our understanding and practice of loving others is critical and totally appropriate in the Church. After all, love is *the* Christian ethic; it is the interpretive lens we should always use in examining the Scripture and reflecting on our behaviour. I'll never have any objection to us talking about loving others.

But I wonder if we talk much about loving God? I think it might have slipped off our radar. I wonder if there is even some unease; some discomfort in the Church around the simple idea of loving God? Perhaps we are listening too much to the extreme voices within our culture that aggressively reject God's reality at all. *How can you love something that doesn't exist?* they would chide. And even though we disagree, we can't help but be impacted by the cultural noise and so we might become sheepish about following this greatest command.

Or it may be that the identity of God has become so political in the Church we've become a bit unsure about the nature of this God we are supposed to love. Is God male or female? close or far away? here of the left or of the right? all powerful or all loving?

Has the questioning, which isn't bad in itself,
left us unsure of who God is for us?
And so it becomes difficult to know who or what to love?
If this is you, may I suggest going back to basics:
Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,
or dwell on the chief Biblical images for God,
God being our rock and fortress,
God as loving Father, or Good Shepherd and so on.

Of course,
we often identify that loving others *is* the way we love God.
We often say we love God *by* loving others.
And yes; that is very much the case.
Jesus led us towards this understanding when he said,
Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.
And in 1 John, we have that wonderful logic;
How can you love God, who you cannot see,
if you don't love your sister and brother, who you can?
This highlights the essential link
between loving God and loving others.

And in today's reading,
even the way Jesus responds to the scribe's question
about *which single commandment* is the greatest;
we notice Jesus responds with 2.
He can't name love of God
without also mentioning love of neighbour.
They belong together.
Love of neighbour elucidates, expounds
and illuminates love of God.

And yet the command to love God can and does stand by itself.
That we love God, is the foundation of the Jewish faith,
from which Christianity grew and to which we owe so much.
And I fear that if we in the Church
do not have a distinct and passionate love for God,
then we have little to distinguish us from other organisations
that serve humanity well, and often better than the Church.

So, recently I have asked myself,
how do I love God *outside* of loving others;
What forms my relationship with the Sacred?
And I have found myself in a funny place.
I've found myself in the 10 commandments
and other laws of the OT.

We often say - and rightly so –
that Jesus' command to love God and neighbour
is a summary of all the commands of the Hebrew Scriptures
- all 613 of them.

The complexity of the Old Testament laws
is beautifully simplified in the command to love.

But if we are looking for some detail,
some concrete examples of what loving God means,
maybe we can go the other direction.

Maybe the 10 commandments and other OT regulations
point to what love looks like.

This is easy to see with love of neighbour;
part of loving them means not to kill them,
or steal from them or lie about them.

Other OT laws about living in community
talk about leaving some grapes when you harvest
so the poor have something to glean;
welcoming the foreigner who resides among you,
returning a neighbour's wandering livestock,
and not causing a blind person to stumble.

It is not difficult for us to make the interpretive leap
to our own day and culture
in order to understand what these commands teach us
about loving our neighbour.

When it comes to loving God,
we might start with the first 4 commandments.

Don't have other gods before me.

Don't make images and don't bow down to them.

Keep God's name sacred,
and keep the Sabbath.

These speak to the holiness; the specialness of God.

They speak of the priority we are to give to God in our living.

Love of God therefore, is not some tender feeling –
it is all about commitment, obedience and right attitude.

The commands of the Hebrew Scriptures
call us to fidelity to God, who is faithful to us.

Who or what has pride of place in your life?

What do your actions reveal about your true values?

To whose worldview do you subscribe?

How are your priorities determined?

So to love God is to choose God;
to serve God; to defer to God in all things.

Jesus understood this clearly.

In his farewell speech in John's gospel,

he repeats about 5 times

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Our other reading today is from the book of Ruth.

Some say that the story of Ruth is almost a parable on the OT concept of *steadfast love* or *loving kindness*.

In the story, by all logic and common sense,

Ruth ought to do as Naomi suggests and return to her own country.

There is little chance of her finding a husband in Naomi's Israel, something so critical in that patriarchal society.

Yet such is the bond and steadfast love between them that Ruth gives her mother-in-law the poetic commitment,

*"Do not press me to leave you,
or to turn back from following you.
Wherever you go, I shall go;
where you lodge, I shall lodge
your people shall be my people
and your God, my God."*

This is a picture of the commitment God has for us.

And it is the sort of whole-hearted response

God seeks from his people:

committed, focused, loyal, devoted, faithful.

This is love of God.

So friends, apples AND peaches.

Love of others AND love of God.

Love God by loving others AND

love God by your choices, commitments
and daily behaviour;

by the habits you develop,

by the time you spend in prayer,

by listening and laying your life before God,

by placing God first in all you do.

This is love of God

and it is the greatest call on our human lives.