

Intro prayer: Lord open our ears; inform our minds; renew our hearts...

Matthew 22:34-46

Here at McGuinness Mansion every day starts with the same liturgical exchange. I open with: Have you let Merlin-cat out? At what time? and Would you like a cup of tea? Gordon responds in bold: Yes. About 5.30. and Yes please. The words are automatic and predictable and we hardly know we're saying them.

Well, this morning's reading echoes words we hear in our Sunday service week by week just after the Prayer of Preparation: Jesus' commands that we are to love God all our hearts, souls, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves. Perhaps some weeks they hold our attention, on others they wash over us, as they come and go, but this morning we're going to stay with them and take a closer look.

Matthew's Gospel recounts that these words were Jesus' reply to the Pharisees' question: Which of God's commandments given in the Scriptures is the most important? There are no fewer than 613 commands recorded in Leviticus, and weighing up where they came in the spiritual league table was a matter for much theological debate. What would Jesus, this upstart Rabbi say? Would he agree with the super-spiritual Pharisees that 'You shall love the Lord your God with all..' was in the top slot? Thus proving them right. Or would he another one be his pick, thus showing himself up as guilty of sacrilege? Theirs was not an innocent enquiry. At first, Jesus seems to be on message. He's gone for 'You shall love the Lord your God' for number 1 - but then he adds in 'and love your neighbour as yourself.' It's a tie. Well, the Pharisees don't know what to do with that.

Jesus declares that the good life involves both a vertical dimension - a relationship of obedience to God and a horizontal dimension of love in relationship to one another and ourselves. When these interlinked commandments are in place and aligned, the fulfilling of all God's commandments flow as they were intended to do, expressing the Law's righteousness and Prophetic justice.

The Pharisees have pulled them apart, trying to finesse the purity of a pious vertical spiritual dimension on the one hand. But on the horizontal, being pre-occupied with a loveless nitpicking at the detail of keeping God's. I've said they don't know what to do with what Jesus says to them. But the soon do. In Matthew's Gospel, the next time the Pharisees appear, it is to arrest Jesus. Within days, a horizontal and vertical dimension is made in wood and Jesus is crucified on it - the ultimate act of obedience to the Father and love of humankind.

Now, on the other side of the Cross and Jesus' Resurrection. we hear his words from a very different place, The New Covenant with God's people has dawned in the power of the Spirit. But Jesus' commands to us still hold. So what do Jesus' words say to us today?

Let's focus first on two words: heart and love.

Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart. I don't know what that word says to you. In our culture, our first thoughts might be the red hearts on Valentine's Day cards; little heart icons floating about on Facebook - symbols of warm or romantic feelings. We might see the heart as an organ, particularly if it is causing us concern.

But when Jesus refers to the heart, he means much more. In the Bible the heart is the central part of our inner person; it's the core of our will and choices; the seat of our passions and values; our nature, our disposition, the orientation of our whole being. One Biblical scholar suggests that 'you shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind is better translated as 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart .. and that is soul and mind. The heart is everything inside that makes us us and we are called to love God with all we've got.

And what about this word love? What do we think that's about? In our language, love can be for a multitude of recipients from a partner to a pizza. And we generally view it as being an emotion, a responsive glow to to something or someone that makes us feel good or meets our needs.

There are different kinds of love: the Christian theologian and writer C S Lewis has written about The Four Loves that are described by the Ancient Greek words of eros - romantic love; storge - familial love, like a parent for a child; philia - brotherly friendship love and agape - unconditional love, sacrificial love like God has for us. Jesus is talking about agape love here. Far more powerful than a nice feeling, this love is a deliberate choice to worship and obey God; to act in the best interest of those around us - and ourselves as well. I guess we recognise that love that can involve much emotion of joy and tenderness, goes beyond it in service of another. We don't always feel glowing when we do something for another do we? Or on a spiritual high when we come together for worship, online or face-to-face? We may not feel warm as we get up in the night to attend to a sick child, or fulfil a commitment we've made that gets in the way of what we want to do. But this is love.

Love is a four-letter word. It could be described in other 4 letter words, too: time - for other; risk - in openness and vulnerability; acts - love is what we do. The Acts

of the Apostles is the love-story of the Early Church's walk with God and sharing his gift of life with others.

Sometimes love is not glamorous; there is a lovely poem U A Fanthorpe about love that starts:

*There is a kind of love called maintenance,
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;*

*Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;*

*Which answers letters; which knows the way
The money goes, which deals with dentists.*

This, the poet says, is the sensible side of love. And there is a sacrificial side. In his book, *Return from Tomorrow*, Rickie Sherrill, a doctor serving with the US forces liberating German concentration camps in June 1945, writes about a remarkable inmate they found at one in Poland - a Polish prisoner with an unpronounceable name, that the American soldiers nicknamed Wild Bill Cody because of his big Western-style moustache. He was a remarkable man, helping the Americans help the prisoners. Not only was he fluent in many languages, he seemed to have endless energy and compassion. He'd been in the camp six years in the same conditions as his fellow prisoners, yet he seemed much healthier than they. One day, over a mug of tea, the author found out why: 'We lived in the Jewish section of Warsaw,' said Wild Bill, 'my wife, our two daughters, and our three boys. When the Germans reached our street they lined everyone up against a wall and opened up with machine guns. I begged to be allowed to die with my family, but because I spoke German, they put me in a work group. I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who mattered most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life - whether it was a few days or many years - loving every person I came into contact with.'

Love was his choice. And in Wild Bill, the author, who had had a profound encounter with Christ when he was in heart surgery a year or so before, saw not just a power that had kept this man well, but the presence of the Christ he had known in his hospital bed.

We are not living in the extreme circumstances of a Wild Bill Cody, but we are in trying times. As we continue through this pandemic, into winter, recession in this changed world around us, can we make the choice again, re-affirm our

commitment to loving God with all our being and our neighbour as ourselves - and discovering what that might mean? To seek ways of staying close to God so we know how to love one another through these times.

Love is a simple word to say but a deep word to do. We see love practised perfectly in Jesus: how love can mean dining with outcasts, speaking uncomfortable truth; expressing tender compassion; overturning tables in a temple; confronting and comforting; outmanoeuvring the manipulative; allowing himself to be powerless in the face of enemies for the Father's sake.

A tall order? Absolutely. Why do you think we hear Jesus' commandments read just before confession. But we need not be dismayed.

Jesus' commandments are not an impossible bar we have to strive to reach to be accepted. They are an invitation to the good life, the God life, the life always planned for us. We can't achieve it with a white-knuckle ride of strenuous effort. We need a change of heart. But Jesus is the heart surgeon. He has opened up the possibilities of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of fulness of life in him by the power of his Spirit. And he's calling us in.

So let's pray...

Just take a moment to close your eyes and get in touch with your heart... what's going on.. what does your heart beat for today.. is it blocked.. broken...full of joy... struggling with sorrow... delighting in God...unsettled, distracted... how is it with your heart today.. invite the heart surgeon in..

And think of that call to love God and others.. is there a call to love God in a new way... someone you're being called to express love to... make your choices now...