

## Law or Love?

Listening to that reading from Matthew's Gospel I find it interesting that there is no compassion for the family that has lost so many sons - and the poor wife who loses seven husbands and all of them, one assumes, so different from each other....just think what that poor woman has had to contend with!!! And then here's that question....what on earth was he playing at? Of course he was simply trying to catch Jesus out, trip him up. Their intent was to try to show that unlike the Sadducees, Jesus didn't know his law....but of course he sends them packing on their way! Then the Pharisees come along and try the same tactic. Now this was a big mistake on the part of the Pharisees because Jesus comes up with the "Shema"- this was and is at the heart of Judaism and is what orthodox Jews wear on their arms and foreheads and recite every morning and every night and contains several verses from the Bible but in particular those from Deuteronomy "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" Now we think we know it because we've read it in our Bibles, but we've read it in English and translations don't really have the strength that is found in the Hebrew original. So let's take a closer look at it.

Historically, sociologically Love wasn't an emotion...it wasn't about valentine cards and red roses....no, love was action. If you loved someone you enacted it. If you loved someone, you showed your love in action you might recall that lovely song from Fiddler on the Roof in which the wife, in answer to the question "Do you love me?" lists all the things she has done for him - I've made a home, washed his clothes, darned his socks, milked the cows, brought up the children etc etc... for her in her Jewish background, love is being shown in what she does; love is an action. So today we can say "I love so and so" but if we do nothing then we've failed. We can look at asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, down and outs and feel sorry for them, say we love them but if we do nothing then we've failed.

"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"

"Heart" was the seat of conscious action... you acted because you consciously wanted to do it. As for "soul" it was your very being, the very nature of yourself, and as for "might" it meant your possessions, your resources and your abilities. So the Shema says that you shall show your love of God in acting and turning your thoughts to the ways of God, by loving in every aspect of your person, and by giving all you are and all you have in service of that love - that's what the Shema says.

So that's what Jesus says is the greatest commandment and then you have to show that love to everybody else and not just to God. Clearly this didn't go down too well with the Pharisee - they would rather deal with the law... they work on the basis of religiosity! They were saying "The law is the most important thing!" But the law was about stopping people, and to a large extent it's still about stopping people. For the Sadducees and Pharisees it was a question of being 'holier than thou' and keeping sinners at arms' length. After all sin could rub off - social distancing prevails!!! There's no vaccination against sin! That is what the Pharisees believed - sin is contagious, and keep clear of us until you do what we tell you to do to make yourself clean. For them it was all about separation.

Strange, though despite that fact that Jesus was the culmination of the law and the prophets he doesn't seem to have read the book....Jesus was entirely different. Jesus didn't turn people away because of the law, Jesus brought them in because of love. Just think of those stories where Jesus actually embraced those who were outcasts . He didn't say "What's your sin?...are you going to stop it" Zaccheus responded to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Did the prodigal's father hold up the festivities until his wayward son had confessed what he'd been up to? ....No, he simply runs down and hugs him!

The point is, Is it the law or is it Love? Jesus doesn't separate, doesn't use the law as a barrier. His love is inclusive and welcoming The most contagious thing in Jesus's world is love, the most contagious thing in the Kingdom of God is Love, Why did Jesus go to the cross? Because he loved us. A total sacrificial all-embracing giving love as denoted in the Shema. The cross stands for Love - that's why we are here, that's why we are Christians. Because we know we are loved by God in Christ. Too often in the past the most important thing in the church has been the law - saying the some people are not good enough, their gender is wrong, the colour of their skin is wrong they are not the right 'sort'. We know those things existed - and not that long ago either! But we are not about excluding people because of their sexuality, their colour, their race, their creed their gender. We read of the great inclusivity of the Kingdom - that's what comes from love that's what Jesus is, and that is our challenge.

The law CAN be about exclusion but Jesus was about inclusion, about love. Love welcomes, love embraces, all. All need to be loved , all want to be loved . Loving is hard, but Jesus loves us to the uttermost and we are called to do the same and its what makes us stand out from the rest of the world - we love because he loved us!

Amen