

Twenty third Sunday after Pentecost 23rd October 2005

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Readings:

- Deuteronomy 34.1-12
- Psalm 90:1-6 — page 318
- 1Thessalonians 2:1-13
- Matthew 22:34-46

Sunday 23rd October 2005 - The Twenty third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 22:34

'When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees they came together and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, *to test him*

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"

Jesus, is still in the Temple debating with the religious leaders. In Mark's gospel the setting for this story has a much less confrontational feel about it. Here, in Matthew's version, the lawyer is out to test Jesus.

In Mark's version the lawyer asks because he is grateful Jesus had confounded the Sadducees with his answer about resurrection. He had heard how well Jesus could answer and the two became quite close. But there is antagonism in the way Matthew reports the incident as the confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders draws to a close.

NB

Mark — "there is no commandment greater than these."

Matthew — "On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew's "Jewish answer to the Pharisees.)

In answer to the question "which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus summarizes and defines true religion as loving God and loving one's neighbour.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

He quotes from Deuteronomy — the Law of Moses; the Shema.

It is the opening sentence of every Jewish service and the first text every Jewish child learns.

We give to God a love which

- dominates the emotions
- directs the thoughts
- inspires one's action

Draw our attention at this point to the first reading about the "Promised Land". It is always interesting how the Promised Land doctrine is expressed as one's love for God. ie Holding the idea of the "Promised Land" as the sign of Love for God seems to take precedence over love for neighbour as Israelis fend off the Palestinians, and love for God becomes an exercise in power instead of being expressed in love for one's neighbour. Many Israelis of course want peace with the Palestinians.

The second commandment Jesus quotes is from Leviticus 19:18. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

How hard is that?

But there is no other way!

And yet *we*, like the Israelis, promptly and conveniently forget that the reason behind the command is that to love God comes with a binding responsibility to love those who are created, as Genesis says, "in the Image of God."

On these two commandments "hang all the law and the prophets" — these commandments sum up all that is important in the history of their relationship with God. Again, the way Matthew tells the story indicates how he interprets Jesus as the one who fulfils the historic teaching and expectations of the Jewish people.

Questions have been put to Jesus by

- Herodians
- Sadducees
- Pharisees

But now as this section of the gospel closes, *Jesus* asks the question:

What do you think of the Messiah?
Whose son is he?

The Pharisees reply that the Messiah will be the Son of David; a widely held belief by the Jews of the time of Jesus.

But this idea indicated that they believed the Messiah to be of the type of leader David was — a great and powerful political leader and warrior.

But their answer raised a difficulty. David was inspired by the Spirit as a prophet and in one of his psalms he spoke of the Messiah as "my Lord" and that the Messiah would sit at the right hand of God. This implies that the Messiah is greater than David and cannot be his son or descendant. In other parts of this gospel, Matthew describes Jesus as having brought to the world

- something greater than Jonah
- something greater than Solomon
- something greater than the Temple

Matthew records the story to say **NOW** Jesus brings that something greater than David — something greater than great political and warlike skill. Jesus brings something very different ...

The questioning by the Jewish leaders ends and they do not ask him any more questions. The Pharisees are pictured as unbelievers as they cannot give an answer to Jesus! This is how it must be, because as Jesus has pointed out, the knowledge of who he is is only given by the Father (Ch 16) and it is hidden from the wise and understanding. (Ch 11)

So Matthew paints the picture of the supposedly wise and learned being confounded by Jesus who then moves on to talk to the crowds and his disciples. Jesus clearly wins the

religious debate with the Jewish leaders and their opposition to him now goes underground to re emerge in the house of Caiaphas where they conspire to kill him. It is strange isn't it that those who know the commands of God could not let go of power long enough to really see how far off the mark they had gone. They had head knowledge, they knew all the right words to say, but when it came to the crunch they could not love God with heart and soul and mind because they could not love one who tried to entice them into discussion about the deeper issues.

We can stand off and point the finger at the opponents of Jesus, but we must ask the question — Are we not, quite often, just the same?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."