

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 29 October 2023
Reverend Martin Johnson

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 22:34-46

What is theology? This is a question that many eminent people have endeavoured to answer though the centuries. Perhaps the most enduring and pithy answer comes from Anselm the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury for him theology was 'faith seeking understanding.' That of course raises a whole lot more questions, about the nature of faith, and importantly, of understanding, of knowing, of knowing God.

Today we engage in a gospel passage that concludes a series about knowing. Jesus in this chapter of Matthew's gospel engages with some of the factions, religious and political of his day and they question him, testing his knowledge and interpretation of the law, often to trick him in its finer points.

The Pharisees were primarily lawyers, so their knowledge lay in the law. It was a law given by God, through Moses, God could be known through law, and they were its interpreters, its keepers. The Sadducees were another sect in 1st century Judaism. They were involved in the maintenance of the Temple the place where God most particularly dwelt. God could be known in this place, the Priestly class and the Sadducees were its keepers. Jesus responds today as the chapter comes to a close with a question of his own, more of a riddle really, and his inquisitors are silenced. I think there is a very good reason why Jesus ended this discussion in this way, which I will explain.

I mentioned a couple of Sundays ago about how we live in the shadow of the enlightenment era, the so-called age of reason. For the children of enlightenment the pursuit of knowledge involved reason and the evidence of the senses. The philosophy behind this age is known as epistemology, the philosophy of knowing. Today we live in a world that craves evidence and data, facts and certainty, the internet is full of them, but unfortunately many of them are erroneous, ideological or just plain wrong! The problem is that this breeds scepticism which is so common today, and which we in communities of faith are well aware of.

Today Jesus is challenged about his knowledge of the law, and therefore his knowledge of God; his theology if you like. He responds by quoting scripture back to the experts, two texts. First is from Deuteronomy chapter 6: Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. This is perhaps one of the most important texts for the Jewish people, encompassing as it does the Shema, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' But Jesus places this text alongside another which we heard this morning from the book of Leviticus: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. What Jesus was doing was establishing an epistemology, how do we know God?

This then is a Christian epistemology, we know by loving, love is the ultimate form of knowledge. One of the problems of the Christian faith for some is that it can either be doctrinaire or sentimental, the love that Jesus speaks about and demonstrates, and which is at the heart of our faith is neither of these, it is about truly knowing. If we are to really know something or someone, we need to empty ourselves of preconceptions, misconceptions, give that idea, that thing, that person room. When I thought of this I was reminded of the Song of Mary in Luke's gospel, what we call the Magnificat. It is the canticle for evening prayer, so it is said every day, it begins 'My Soul doth magnify the Lord.'

This perhaps does seem to be an odd thing to say in relation to God, since we can't do anything to make God bigger than God is. In this context the word magnify is used to mean praising, whether praising God or praising other human beings. And we should think of that that when we praise someone or something else. In other words when we love them, we make them bigger in the sense of giving them more room: we step back, we put our preoccupations and goals and plans aside so as to let the reality of something or someone else live in us for that moment, find room in us. Real praise, real love is neither dogmatic or sentimental it is about forgetting myself,

even my feelings, so that something beyond myself comes alive in me, this is how we truly know someone or something, how we know and love God.

In last year's Boyer lecture series for the ABC, indigenous leader Noel Pearson laid bare a challenge to our nation, but to Christians, I sensed, particularly: 'We are a much unloved people.' He said. 'We are perhaps the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular and we are not personally *known* to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends. And despite never having met any of us and knowing very little about us other than what is in the media and what WEH Stanner, called 'folklore' about us – Australians hold and express strong views about us, the great proportion of which is negative and unfriendly. It has ever been thus.' I cite these words from Noel Pearson not because I want to keep rehearsing the issue of the referendum, although that has been much in my mind and my prayers. But because it perfectly describes this connection between knowledge and love.

When Jesus is questioned, he knows that he is being asked these questions not out of love but out of malice. Jesus knows that the religious folk do not know him, he is not loved; he confirms that by the enigmatic question that he puts to them at the end of today's passage. It was to remind them, and us, that all human knowledge is to varying degrees incomplete, we are constantly discovering new knowledge. The idea of love as knowledge requires of us humility because our love is incomplete. But God's love is that constant between our present incomplete knowledge and that which is to come. It is best put by St Paul in this poetic passage in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For at the moment all that we can see
Are puzzling reflections in a mirror;
Then, face to face. I know in part, for now;
But then I'll know completely, through and through,
Even as I am completely known. So, now,
Faith, hope, and love remain, these three; and, of them,
Love is the greatest.

God is love and Jesus is loves' keeper. Amen.