

Homily - 30th Sunday, Year A - 2017

*You must love the Lord your God...
& you must love your neighbour as yourself*

Jesus did not invent these two commandments: they are both in the Bible. But so were a lot of other rules – over 600 of them. In fact, the lawyers and Pharisees used to argue about how they could simplify them: can we reduce them to one or two absolutely basic principles that all the rest depend on? As one rabbi put it, light-heartedly: ‘We should be able to recite the essence of the Law while standing on one leg’.

The experts, of course, as so often, disagreed on what those basic principles were –but some of them actually said the same as Jesus: ‘Love God, love your neighbour as yourself’. So when Jesus said that, there’d be some people amongst his hearers who would have spoken up in agreement with him.

But Jesus went further than that. He didn’t just hold up the two commandments like the two separate tablets that Moses held up in the story from the book of Exodus. Jesus he brought them so closely together you couldn’t see the joins. For Jesus it was all one commandment of love – loving God, and loving the men and women God created in his own image: you couldn’t have one without the other. Just like the single entity of a coin has two facets which are but aspects of the one thing.

How can I say I love God, if I don’t reverence and respect you my neighbour, who’s made in the image of God? How can I say my prayers, go to church and all the other religious things, if I do little or nothing to help those who need me – whether it’s people close at hand like family and friends, or people far away like victims of famine or warfare or catastrophe? If I live like that, I’m living a lie. The Apostle James in his Letter emphasises the importance of the believer actually undertaking good works as an indication that their faith is authentic. And St John in his First Letter wrote: *Those who say ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars.* (1 John 4:20)

Bust, as we well know, two hundred years ago good Christian people were going to church and singing their hymns, while all the time slave-ships from Bristol were transporting their cargo of human misery to the sugar and cotton plantations in America – and in some of those the Master conducted Christian worship for his slaves (c.f. the film: *Twelve years a Slave*). It took William Wilberforce - and others like him - many years to get the slave-trade abolished (in this country and in the British Empire).

Now, as then, we can live a lie and do dreadful deeds without even realising it.

No doubt we see that clearly enough. But it’s true the other way round as well. **If I do not love God, I cannot love my neighbour either, not fully, or as well as might.**

Some might question that statement. They might say: what about all the aid workers who go to the help of people in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Syria and elsewhere who risk their lives, endure real hardship, to serve others more needful than themselves? Certainly, in all the war-zones and disaster areas of the world you will find men and women risking their lives, their health, their future, as they try to rescue, or feed, or heal their fellow human beings.

Some of them will be believers but others are not – they may even be atheists. They don't believe in God; they don't love God: But they clearly love their fellow human beings.

Why do they do it? For most of them, surely, it is because they recognise the value of each of those human beings that they will go down under collapsed, unstable buildings to bring out a terrified child, or work in some disease-ridden refugee camp, or seek to rescue people at risk and become themselves vulnerable to attack.

Whether they believe in God or not, in what they do they are truly loving the God whose image and likeness they are seeing and loving in the suffering people all around them. Of course they may not agree with that way of looking at what they do, which is a Christian understanding.

So do these two commandments really **depend** on each other as Jesus asserts?

It may be helpful to recall the story of John Newton, the author of the well - known hymn *Amazing Grace*. He was the captain of a slave ship, crossing the Atlantic many times with his suffering human cargo. But then on a wonderful occasion it dawned on him how he was actively participating in a dreadful disregard of human dignity. He was *graced* to see the reality of the awful trade which he was party to. And this realisation changed his whole life.

Indeed, the grace of God can help each and all of us to perceive reality more clearly. The grace of God can also help us to persevere in right living when we face difficulties and discouragement. The grace of God can help us to reconsider our priorities. The grace of God enables us to become more fully human, more compassionate, more generous, more courageous, perhaps more effective than we are of ourselves. In other words, to love God, to be open to God's grace, enables us to become more loving than we already are.

The grace of God helps us to overcome the blindness or myopia, and the apathy or inaction, which is the result of our sinful condition, our 'fallen state'. The grace of God, enlightens us, encourages us, facilitates our charitable works and resources our efforts for greater justice in this world.

We might recall from the Gospel story how, when Jesus said his words about the two greatest commandments, a lawyer in the crowd called out: 'Well spoken, Master!' And how Jesus looked at him and responded: *You are not far from the Kingdom of God.*

We can each and all *grow* in our natural goodness, become *more participant in the Kingdom of God, and build it up a little more in this present world.*

The familiar Gospel story today invites us to say again in our hearts, and in our gatherings, the well-known prayer of St Richard:

*Grant O Lord, three things I pray:
To see thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day.*