

Proper 25 Year A 2020

It seems like every day, certainly two or three times a week, I get an e-mail or telephone call that I immediately suspect as being a scam. The phone message about my subscription to Amazon Prime (to which I do not subscribe) is again doing the rounds. Just put the phone down!

But scamming is not something new. The ancient world had its fair share of scammers - wandering salesmen, travelling teachers, people who made a living by offering their hearers fresh wisdom or insights, magic, a new philosophy or whatever - trying to make for themselves a good name and a following and, of course, money. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that whilst he (and Silvanus and Timothy) - whilst they were amongst them, they got up to none of the tricks generally expected - but had proclaimed the gospel because God had entrusted them with this mission - there was no deceit, impure motive or trickery. At the heart of everything he had done amongst them was God. He was 'bold in God', he preached the gospel of God, he had been approved or validated by God, he simply wanted to please God, and God was his witness, witness that he sought neither wealth

nor flattery. He simply wanted the love of God to embrace them. The Christians of Thessalonica would have recognised this self-portrait as an accurate one; they loved Paul for the gift of faith he had brought to them, and he, in return, loved them for their faithfulness, their hope, their love, love not only of Paul, but of one another, of Christ, and of their neighbours, as reflected in the way they lived their lives. And love, really, is the theme of the day.

'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' A trick question, of course. If it had been a Sadducee asking the question, the correct answer would have been found within the Ten Commandments, but the Pharisees (who are asking today's question) would have looked much further afield, and included in the melting pot hundreds of later additions and interpretations. No matter which commandment he chose, Jesus would be wrong - he would offend one faction or another - and how can one commandment be greater than another if they are all of divine inspiration?

EXCEPT - one commandment was held by everyone to be ahead of the others - from Deut.6 - 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind' - except

Deut doesn't have 'with all your mind', it has 'with all your might'. Jesus has changed it. Perhaps that is a criticism of the Pharisees who use 'all their mind' on endless interpretation of minute details of the laws accretions.

And then, as if that wasn't enough, Jesus, who clearly knew his scripture, adds a second commandment, from Leviticus, which we heard earlier today - 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

It is a commandment, not an optional extra. 'On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets'. Jesus has taken these two commandments and made a nice sandwich of them - a totally new 'compound commandment', which he believes is a summary of all that has been revealed - a blow indeed to the Pharisees because their professional lives hinge on constantly prising out more and more abstruse legalistic revelations in scripture, to add to the burdens they already lay upon the backs of the people.

(It feels a little bit like the Covid regulations at the moment. Can I do this? Am I allowed or not allowed to do that? Keep it simple!)

And Jesus does keep it simple. Love God, love your neighbour.

Simple. Except, another question Jesus had been asked was 'who

is my neighbour?' The Pharisees know that Jesus' definition of neighbour was very different to theirs. For the Israelites, their definition of neighbour was fellow Israelites (excluding sinners, of course, who were deemed to be outside the Law - hard luck if you were a shepherd!) It can be rather instinctive. You love people who are just like you - it helps you make the right, suitable friends, it holds a family together (no guessing about who is coming for dinner) and it breeds what we now call tribalism; tribal, national, 'us-ness'.

That wasn't good enough for Jesus. If we are made in the image of God and God is love and loves everything and everybody he has made, we too must love everything and everybody he has made, even if we can't stand them! (Am I excused wasps?) Jesus taught us that anyone in need is our neighbour - God's love knows no barrier of skin colour or tribal allegiance; this love will not allow us to cage up the alien in detention centres, will not allow us to see people drowning in the Channel as they flee persecution or poverty, or ostracise those who are different, condemn those of other belief systems to prison - or hell fire. This is a love which gives rather than takes, which forgives rather than condemns, welcomes in rather than shutting out - a love so powerful that it

will allow itself to be taken outside the city walls and be crucified by those who fear its inclusivity - a love stronger than death, a love we are called to live with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds - a love offered to our neighbours as well as to ourselves and those like us - the one great command - love God, love your neighbour, love one another as I have loved you.