

Our gospel story is set on the Tuesday of Holy Week, three days before Jesus is crucified, and it marks the climax of his public disputes with the religious authorities.

The Pharisees have tried to trap him with a political question – ‘is it lawful to pay our taxes to Caesar?’ – and the Sadducees have been silenced after an absurd question about resurrection. Now a Pharisee who is also a lawyer asks an apparently more open question: ‘Which commandment is the greatest?’ In Mark’s account of this exchange, the lawyer comments so wisely on Jesus’ answer that he is told he is ‘not far from the Kingdom of God’ (Mk.12.34). There is no such elaboration in Matthew and we must assume that the question is a trap like all the others.

The Pharisees saw all the Jewish laws as having equal weight, so whatever Jesus answered could have led to a dispute. Jesus was no Pharisee but he was a great respecter of the law, and he famously tells his hearers during the Sermon on the Mount that he has not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it. How should that be done? Jesus goes right to the root of the law – the fundamental principle, as he sees it – and silences his critics once more.

Jesus identifies the two commandments on which the Law and the Prophets hang: the command in Deuteronomy 6 to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and the command contained in our first reading from Leviticus, to “love your neighbour as yourself”. And he applies them directly to his questioner, saying “*You shall love . . .*”. The lawyer would have expected an abstract answer. Instead, Jesus takes a universal theological truth and applies it directly to the individual.

These two commands are intertwined. As the prophets repeatedly remind the people, God desires justice and mercy and not just sacrifice. And as Jesus points out repeatedly, through his teaching, his stories and his actions, love of God is of no use if love for our neighbour doesn’t flow directly from it.

The detachment of religious observance from love of neighbour has been described as ‘the temptation of the pious perfectionists’ who define degrees of virtue and sanctity mostly by the distance they have achieved between themselves and the world of poor, unwashed humankind. This exclusionary piety finds its antithesis in Jesus, who scandalises the Pharisees precisely by his immersion in the lives of the so called poor and unwashed. His teaching about the inextricable connection between love of God and love of neighbour is

expressed completely in the pattern of his life — and is about to reach its consummation in his self-sacrifice on the Cross.

I'm currently reading a book from Simon's extensive library. It's called 'Take this bread' by Sara Miles, an American journalist and former chef. It's an account of her unexpected conversion at a communion service she has wandered into, and the realisation that her vocation was to take the bread which had fed her and feed others. She started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where she'd first received the body of Christ. She organized new pantries all over the city of San Francisco to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week.

In the Prologue to the book Sara writes: 'I stumbled into a radically inclusive faith centred on sacraments and action. What I found wasn't about angels, or going to church, or trying to be 'good' in a pious, idealized way. It wasn't about arguing a doctrine ... or pledging blind allegiance to a denomination. I was, as the prophet said, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the poor, the despised and the outcasts are honoured.'

Now I freely admit that Bovingdon isn't San Francisco, but I do find Sara Miles' radical vision of inclusivity and welcome a compelling one. It is also, I have to admit, challenging - if not frightening. How do we become a community where everyone is welcome, where the poor, the despised and the outcasts are honoured? How do we make sure that we not only love God, but that we love our neighbour as ourselves?

In pursuing an answer we won't ignore the good things we already do, nor will we slavishly follow a template from a different culture and demography. But we will need to look more radically, I believe, at our worship, our language, our customs, our building and our financial resources. The pandemic has already freed us to be more experimental, to embrace new technology and new ways of worship, to give more generously and to care more methodically. I hope and pray it may free us to develop a vision of service, welcome and inclusion which enables us respond more wholeheartedly to God's love for us and to deepen the way in which we let that love flow out to those around us.

Charles Burch