

The command of love

Leviticus 19:1-4, 15-18

Matthew 22:34-40

I was watching television the other day and for lack of any interesting programmes I have ended up dipping into some obscure little romantic tale. As I was half listening half concentrating on something else I heard one of the characters saying to the other: "Your love has changed me. I am not the same as I was before, I see things in such a different light now". I pricked up my ears at this. I don't even remember what the film was, but I did recognise the sentiments as the core message of our Christian faith about the power of love.

Something like this happens, when we come to the Book of Leviticus. It is not a very popular book, probably the least read of the Bible. We do not know much about it and not many sermons are preached on it. In fact, the reading we've just heard read to us (by Janet), is the only passage of Leviticus, which appears in the Common Lectionary. The Book itself is a collection of commandments regulating Israel's life in all its religious and practical aspects and the last phrase of our reading "*You must love your neighbour as yourself*", is almost lost among the many ritual and secular laws that Israel is commanded to obey and which, on the whole, seems quite foreign to our way of thinking. But, clearly, it was not lost on Jesus, and it is through his quoting it, that it has become familiar to Christians, most of whom probably would not associate it with the Old Testament. Yet, here it is, in the middle of Leviticus, part of the so-called 'Holiness Code' incorporated in a priestly document. Jesus' use of it is a telling sign of how well he knew his Scriptures, our Old Testament and how much of those Scriptures shaped his understanding and vision of, what he called, the Kingdom of God. One commentator goes as far as saying that "Jesus' entire ministry is an extended commentary on this core message of Leviticus", which is contained in the Holiness Code.

As we heard in our NT reading Jesus combines this little-known Leviticus commandment with a much better known OT passage from Deuteronomy (6:5) as he summarises the Commandments: "*Love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind; and the second is like it....*". And so, through Jesus' creative interpretation we learn how the Word of God given to a particular people in a particular situation can become a living Word in another time for another people. That's why we treasure our Bible, we have learnt it from Jesus and as he did, we too believe that its words can become a Living Word for us, in our own time.

The setting of Leviticus is the wilderness, a time of crisis for Israel. The past is left behind, they had escaped from Egypt, the land of slavery and at this stage their future is unclear. And the Word of God comes to them: if they are to be holy, as their God is holy, they are to love their neighbour as themselves. According to scholarly opinion the actual writing down of the Book of Leviticus in its final form took place during the exile in Babylon. Another time of great national distress. The people had now lost their homeland; their religious centre, the Temple of Jerusalem is in ruins and they are incarcerated in a foreign land. Their very existence as a nation is threatened with not much of a future ahead of them. And the same message comes to them: love your neighbour as yourself.

Fast forward five hundred years and we find them back in their homeland, back in yet another crisis situation. They are now suffering under the oppression of the Roman Empire desperately waiting for their promised Saviour. And along comes Jesus, who looks as if he could be the One, but instead of organising a resistance movement he directs their attention back to the Commandments and talks about love! Love of God and love of neighbour.

As we listen to him in the middle of our own world wide crisis of a raging pandemic, several questions pop into our minds: Can love be commanded? What does it mean to love God? How can we love our neighbours as ourselves, especially when we are limited in so many ways?

We often hear the saying: 'If only everybody obeyed the Ten Commandments the world would be a much better place'. Well, if we go right back to the first mention of the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus, we do not find a command to love God as such. Israel's relationship to God is described in terms of remembering God, keeping in mind God's great acts of liberation, keeping God's Sabbath and having no other gods to worship. Does this amount to

love as we understand it? Would a bride be satisfied with a commitment like this in the groom's wedding vows: 'I will always remember that you are my wife, I will keep in mind the great times we had together and I promise not to go after other women'? The Deuteronomy elaboration, the version that became the twice daily prayer of the Jewish people under the name *The Shema* and the one Jesus quotes in our reading talks about a much deeper, richer commitment of love, which would satisfy any bride. It talks of loving God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our strength. A full-time and absolute commitment involving everything we have and everything we are.

Yet, the question still remains, what does it mean to love God, Creator and upholder of the Universe, in such a complete way? It is a question that must have occupied the mind of Jesus as he reflected on it and was led to remember the almost lost commandment: love your neighbour as yourself – and discovered the organic connection between the two. Beyond feelings and words and prayers, loving our neighbour is THE only practical way we can actually, show love to God.

Can this be commanded though? Well, going back to the marriage theme for a moment, I am reminded of another TV drama, which was about marital break-down. After a number of years of mental abuse by her husband, the wife finally plucks up courage and tells her husband that she doesn't love him any more. To which he answers: but, you must, you are my wife! In his anger he can not see the futility of his argument, as we, the viewers can. Love can not be commanded, not even by marriage vows. Love arises where love is found. The imperative to love God comes to the Israelites *after* they had been assured of the special place they occupy in God's heart and *after* God's love had been shown to them in such tangible ways as liberating them, bringing them out of Egypt and taking care of them in the wilderness. The love they are asked to give is not a condition of their salvation. They are already a loved and cherished people of God. Their love is their way of response. An expression of their intent to remain within that love-relationship and an important witness before the world that they do belong to God.

And if the only way to show this love is by loving their neighbour, what does that entail? In our reading from Leviticus, just before the charge to '*love your neighbour as yourself*' we find a veritable list of how our ancestors in the faith understood this injunction: leaving part of their corn harvest to the poor and the alien, leaving part of their vineyards unharvested for the same reason, not to oppress their neighbours, not to hold back the hired men's wages until even the next morning, not to pervert justice, not to nurse ill-will against anyone, etc. Love through action. Can this be done in an oppressed state, in the middle of a barren land, under an occupying power, or limited by severe Covid regulations? And will it make any difference?

When we go through the list we see that these acts do not require special riches, or exceptional freedoms. All they require is open eyes to see the need, open hearts, which are already full with God's overflowing love for them and open minds that are tuned into and resonate with the grace and joy of God, which embraces them as well as their neighbours. Within that grace we too have the promise that the Spirit of Christ working in us will help us to accomplish this. And in fact, we know it from experience that it can happen even in our restricted circumstances as we give thanks for our community's generous harvest gifts, for the sensitive and ongoing pastoral care of each other, for the cheerful and industrious handiwork that our Hands Together group is producing to be given away as gifts of love for needy causes both in this country and overseas.

Following Jesus' example we too believe, not only that this love makes a difference, but that this love is the only way through which we may find fullness of life, and indeed the only way through which humanity can actually survive. Let it be so and may God's name be praised.

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