Stowe Church 3rd November

Mark 12: 28-34 The Greatest Commandments

Our Gospel passage today comes in the final quarter of Marks Gospel. Jesus by this point was established as a wise teacher, a performer of miracles and someone who clearly listened and was inspired by God the Father. And the Jewish leaders and experts in the law ask Jesus several questions – deep questions and practical questions. Were they trying to catch Jesus out? Or did they really want to learn from him? And Jesus was obviously answering them well.

So an expert of the law now asks, what is the most important commandment of all. The Jews then had thousands of laws and the law kept on becoming more and more complicated and detailed – the Jews needed experts in the law to help them remember them all and apply them to daily living – it probably felt very restrictive. So the question ‘which law is the most important’ makes sense, they wanted to know which out of thousands was the most important to remember and obey. Today we might ask for a sound bite to capture the meaning of something much larger and more complicated – the headline for the whole story perhaps.

Jesus replies: ‘The Lord your God is one Lord and you must love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength’ Every Jew hearing Jesus would have known and agreed with this, they would have called it the *Shema*, a sort of creed of Judaism. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4, in the chapter after the ten commandments and orthodox Jews today will recite this every morning as an affirmation of faith.And the instruction to this commandment is clear – we are to love God with every part of our being – with our mind and with our soul. He is to be the focus of our hearts and minds. And the commandment is to love for God himself is love and Jesus tells us the most important thing we can do is to love.

Then Jesus combines this with ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. Again the commandment is to love -each other. Which comes from Leviticus 19:18 where there is a long list of instructions given by God to Moses. However in Leviticus the language for neighbour is exclusively for a fellow Jew. Whereas when Jesus says it his word for neighbour is all inclusive, he means everyone.

But here, Jesus is the first to put these two Old Testament commandments together. He is the first to link the idea that if we truly love God with all our being, then that will affect how we see and treat other people. For if we love God and feel loved by him we are changed people. If we accept Jesus as our saviour we are changed people. God forgiveness to us makes us forgiving to others. Gods love for us makes us more loving to other people. And we see our neighbour as created by and loved by God, equally as precious to Him as we are.

Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan to illustrate who our neighbour really is. In his story the Priest walks by on the other side more busy on his religious duties if you like than helping the injured man in front of him. We might say that he does not practice what he preaches. I think that is the challenge for us today, do we always live out what we believe? Do we see the human need in front of us and take the time to truly love our neighbour as ourselves? And this is where these commandments come in, for if we focus on loving God with all our being, love for our neighbours will flow from that. If we focus on loving our neighbours as ourselves then of course we will stop and help where we can.

When we live in relationship with God, listening to him and obeying him, we will be influenced by his loving nature and feel that love ourselves.

And in the Gospel the expert in the law seems to understand what Jesus means. He says that loving God and loving our neighbour is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. He could be quoting Samuel here who said that obeying the voice of the Lord gave God more delight than burnt offerings. Similarly Hosea heard the voice of God say ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ (Hosea 6:6) Today religious rituals – and we obviously don’t do burnt offerings now – can be important and significant ways to express and focus on our faith. But doing something special like that is not as important as loving God and loving our neighbour. Because God wants us to be focused on him and on each other and our love should lead to action, positive action. If we live a life based on these commandments, full of love and focused on God we will grow to be more like him. We will be more kind, more patient, more gentle, more understanding, the list goes on and on. For, following these 2 commandments, living our daily lives based on them will be more than something we do, it will inform and change for the better who we are as people.

Jesus replies to the expert in the law ‘you are not far from the kingdom of heaven’ which is such a statement of hope. The kingdom of heaven will be dominated by love. God’s love for us and our love for him. And our love for each other. It sounds wonderful and will be wonderful! And Jesus came to take us there if we follow him. Amen