

Last week we heard how Jesus silenced the Sadducees, who asked their thorniest question about the Torah. Now it is the Pharisees’ turn. We use the term Pharisee today as a term of derision; we say someone is pharisaic if he or she is hypocritical or self-righteous. But this would not have been true during Jesus’ ministry.

The Pharisees were a sect within Judaism, which worked as a social movement seeking to change society with a greater faithfulness to following the Torah. The Pharisees championed synagogue worship in addition to going to the Temple. Jesus taught faithfulness to God and worshipped in the synagogue. Many persons would likely have seen Jesus as a Pharisee or at least being in line with the Pharisees’ school of thought. So this debate is a bit of an in-house argument. The stakes are higher though, as the Pharisees in Jerusalem see Jesus’ growing influence on the crowds, and they seem to want to shut down this movement before it goes any further. The question then comes from a place not of wanting to learn but desiring to trip up the rabbi from Galilee.

And we've all watched news conferences in which reporters seem as keen on tripping someone up as they are to discover truth! So it was then with the Pharisee, rulebook in hand, asking Jesus which rule is the best. Jesus tells them that the most important rule is not a rule at all, but rather a way of life.

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

We call it the Great Commandment or the Summary of the Law. Is it significant, I wonder, that we rarely hear it read out at our eucharists these days! It is read at the beginning of the BCP service of Holy Communion as something of a rattle prayer! The priest rattles it off together without letting it permeate, challenge, or transform. Then we go through the rest of the service and out the door to our nice lifestyles.

These “commands” to love God and those around us are not really commands. Love is not love unless it is free and spontaneous. What Jesus proposes are not just commands or rules but a whole approach to life and to our relationship with others.

There is only one “commandment” consisting of two inseparable parts. The key word is “love” but there are really three loves involved: love of God, love of others and love of self. Ultimately, love of God, the source of all being and life, comes first. Then comes, as a natural outcome, love for all those in whom God dwells and whom God creates. Because they are the objects of his love, they must also be the objects of mine. Lastly, there is the love of self. I also am worthy of being loved.

Strangely enough, to implement these loves effectively, we may have to reverse the order: love of self, leading to love others, leading finally to love of God.

In a way, the most basic love is love of myself. “Love your neighbour as yourself,” says today’s Gospel. On the one hand we might think this is an unnecessary command. Who does not love themselves, think about themselves, worry about their welfare? At the same time, we have been taught many times not to be loving ourselves, not to be selfish and self-centred. And it seems that a great many people do not really love themselves very much at all. Quite a number actually hate themselves and a large number have a low level of self-esteem. They do not like very much what they see in the mirror.

“Why am I afraid to tell you who I am?” writes Fr John Powell in his popular books with that title. “Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? I am afraid to tell you who I am, because, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it's all that I have...”

See how much money we spend on clothes, make-up, appearance, image? Why do so many chase various status symbols to show that they have “arrived”? Where I live, the model of my car, my clothes

and accessories – all carefully chosen to enhance my image and make me look better than I feel I really am. So much of advertising is directed to this inner fear.

Why are we afraid to let others know what we are really like? Why are we so shy to stand up in front of a crowd or ask questions at a meeting or make a speech? Why do people go around looking for status symbols that will make them seem more important in society? We know the obsession of many people for “famous brands”. Did you hear about the man who got a suit made (cheaply) in Bangkok and when he went to collect it, the tailor pulled open a drawer with all the most famous labels. “Which one would you like?” he asked. So the man walks out wearing a cheap suit but with the prestigious label conspicuously sewn to the cuff. Did he walk taller because of that?

Why do so many try to be one of the crowd, why do so many escape into alcohol and drugs? Why do so many, especially the young, even destroy themselves by taking their own lives? In a world of plenty, of endless means of entertainment and pleasure, why is the level of teenage suicides so high? Ultimately, it is because so many people inside have little love for themselves and think that no one else really loves or could love them either.

Now, if we have difficulty loving ourselves, it will be difficult to reach out in love to others. We will be too busy worrying whether others are loving us, or at least the facade we present to others. And indeed that is the case. Individualism is rampant. Freedom means “doing one’s own thing” and to hell with everyone else, except for a small number around who enhance my self-esteem.

When I love myself, I accept myself totally as I am, recognising both my good qualities and my deficiencies and making no effort to hide them from others. I do not really mind what people think of me. That is really their problem, not mine. And, because of that, I have plenty of time to think of them and their needs. Then I have the freedom to reach out and be concerned with the well-being of others. In short, I can begin to love my neighbour as I love myself and because I love

myself. Now, loving the other as oneself only becomes possible if we have, or can grow into, a healthy, sane level of self-appreciation.

Now, the commandment of Jesus begins to make sense. I begin to be aware that when I am being deeply loved by another person, it is in fact also God’s love that I am experiencing. “Where there is love, there is God,” says the First Letter of John. All real love is a manifestation of God’s presence.

Most of the time, God shows his love for me through the people that enter my life. He loves me when they love me; and I am loving him when I love them. In the end, there are not three kinds of love but only one.

This person – this me – with all my strengths and weaknesses, this person with whom I have learnt to be perfectly comfortable, lives a life of loving and being loved. At the centre of it all is the source of all love – God.

Compassion motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, mental or emotional pains of another and themselves.

Compassion involves allowing ourselves to be moved by suffering, and experiencing the motivation to help alleviate and prevent it. Qualities of compassion are patience and wisdom; kindness, fair judgements, perseverance; warmth and resolve.

The more one person knows about the human condition and the associated experiences the more vivid the route to identification with suffering becomes. Identifying with another person is an essential process for human beings,

The Dalai Lama once said that "compassion is a necessity, not a luxury" and that "it is a question of human survival"

And, oh, yes: Who is your neighbour?” asks Jesus. Our neighbour is anyone who stands beside us on this small planet, our island home. Distance is no obstacle to neighbours. A neighbour is any other human being with whom we share the image of God, which is to say, all human beings. A neighbour is not based on worth, on quality of life, on intelligence or beauty, on health or sickness, on moral development or religion, on colour or sexuality or geography. We are all neighbours to one another.

The answer may lie the word “hang.” “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” This word usually gets overlooked in the text. “Hang” can mean the way we put up our clothes in the closet, or it can mean what we do with the birdfeeder or the peg we put our hat upon. But in this text, the word “hang” is the same one used for “Jesus, whom you slew and hanged upon the cross.” That shifts the entire meaning of the Great Commandment, doesn’t it? To love the Lord with all our hearts and souls and minds, and to love our neighbour as ourselves is a crucifixion. It means to die to ourselves. No wonder there are so few volunteers.

We are not just to love God, but our neighbour, and not just God and our neighbour, but we are to love ourselves, as only then can we love our neighbours as ourselves. Everything hangs on love.

God’s special concern for people and not just for worship of Himself is already expressed in a telling sentence from today’s the First Reading, taken from the Book of Exodus. Compassion and sympathy are to be shown in particular to the stranger, the widow, the orphan. “If you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall hear their cry.” Further, money lent to the poor should not require interest; a garment taken as a pledge must be given back before sunset if that is all its owner has to cover himself with during the cold night. “If he cries to me, I will listen, for I am full of compassion,” says the Lord.