

MARK 12:28-34  
WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

Define 'love' for me! How hard it is to define love! There is a whole set of cartoons that begin "love is..."; the one on the screen simply says "love is... sharing everything!" I came across a pair of these cartoons: "love is... washing his bathtub" to be followed by another which said "love is... washing your own bathtub!" How do we define what love is? It is such a hard thing to do; we know it when we see it; we can tell you what we do to show our love for someone, but we can't easily describe what it means to love! Love is something we feel; it is an emotion in our hearts and we feel it and rejoice in it when it's there and we feel the miss of it if it dies and is gone. Love is also something that we do: we express that love; love is seen by the things we do, like washing the dishes together or washing out a bathtub when you're done! These are expressions of love.

Love is also the answer to life's big question. People are still asking life's big questions. It may not happen often in someone's life, but people are still asking what life is all about. Maybe at crisis times in our lives, we ask these questions; maybe at the water-cooler in the office, or beside the photocopier, or over coffee in Starbucks, people have these conversations and ask these big questions – what is life all about? If someone asked you that question tomorrow at work, or over the garden fence or when having coffee and a scone in Ruth's Kitchen, what would you say? How would you answer that question? Or if your children or grandchildren asked you that question – "what is life all about?" – how would you answer them? You can't fob them off with "I don't know" or "let me go away and think about it"; you have 20 seconds in which to tell them the answer that might shape their lives forever. What will you say?

Life's big question – that's what Jesus was asked about in Jerusalem. It was in the week before He died and there had been lots of questions. Some of them were trick questions, people trying to trap Him in His answers so that they could report Him – tax questions to be reported to HMRC and the local Jewish leaders; marriage questions to be reported to the religious leaders; then finally, a lawyer comes along, a scribe. He'd heard them debating the answers to these other questions and was impressed with Jesus' answers. He has a question: there is no sense of it being anything other than genuine. He seems to want to know the answer: "*Of all...*" (Mark 12:28) "Teacher, what is life all about? What really matters in life? I'm looking to be the best kind of person I can, so what should I know? How can I be the best that I can be?" People are still asking that question! They might not ask it in the same way; it might not be a question about commands, but people are still trying to find out what life is all about. They don't always expect Church to tell them!

Here is Jesus' answer: "*Love the...*" (Mark 12:29-31) It is a great answer. It impresses the scribe! Jesus combines two Old Testament pieces into one; these are the two great principles of life. The first comes from Deuteronomy chapter 6 and is all about love for God; the second from Leviticus 19 and is all about love for neighbour. We are to love God and to love our neighbour and these are the two great principles of life. In fact, you can boil down the whole of the Bible's teaching about life and how we are to live to these two principles. When people say that "religion is so complicated and we can't get our heads round all that religion requires of us", tell them "no! It's really very simple; love God, love other people!" That's all there is to it. Let these two principles shape your life and you will have the key to life as Jesus teaches.

Here's where the preacher struggles. What does it mean to love God? We're told what that love should be like and the quality of that love and we'll come back to that in a moment; we're told how we should express that love for God and we'll come back to that in a moment too. But when you ask me what does it mean to love God, I struggle to find words to express what love for God is. Some of you were brought up on the Shorter Catechism, perhaps; catechism is a system of questions and answers which you were expected to learn by heart and by learning these Questions and Answers you learned important things about Christian faith. Question 1 in the Shorter Catechism is about life's big question (excuse the seventeenth century language): "What is the chief end of man?" "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." That is the nearest I can come anywhere to tell you what it means to love God: to enjoy Him, to hold God in the highest esteem, to think He's wonderful, to respect Him. This is all about relationship; it is not a tick-box exercise, but a living, loving relationship with the living God, our Father.

What I can tell you is that according to Jesus this is to be wholehearted love. "*Love the...*" (Mark 12:30) The heart is the centre of our whole being, the part of us that controls our emotions and our will; love for God is to come from the very centre of our being, the place where we shape our character and our choices, all that we are as people. The mind suggests that our love is not mere blind emotion, but thought-out, reasonable. The soul is all about the whole of our inner self, our emotions, desires, personality – all that makes us unique individuals. Strength – it is suggested that when this word is used in Deuteronomy 6 it means literally "w/your very-muchness, greatly, exceedingly, to total excess!" Now, it doesn't matter too much that we divide this love up into four, because what it really tells us is that this love for God is to be wholehearted, to encompass our whole being, all that we are. Love for God is to shape us as people, shape our life, our choices, our personalities; the most important thing about us, says Jesus, is that we love God with every fibre of our being.

We express that love for God in all kinds of ways: we express our love for God by our worship and our commitment to worship says something about the depth of our love for God; we express our love for God by praying, by our giving of time, talents and money and again the link between our love for God and the level of our giving is more profound than we're willing to admit at times. We express our love for God by keeping His commands and by seeking to do His will, by being the right kind of people. We express our love for God by our commitment to God's people, the Church and again the connection between the two is stronger than we know. There are all kinds of ways in which we express our love for God, but even the scribe saw that we can confuse these: "*To love...*" (Mark 12:33) Sacrifice and offerings – these are the ways in which God's people expressed their love, but so often they got it wrong; they confused the expression of love for the real thing; the most important thing was to offer sacrifices and to make sure they got that right, but they forgot to love God first. There are all kinds of ways in which we express that love for God and all of them spring first of all from a deep devotion to God, from a right relationship.

"*Love your...*" (Mark 12:31) This is hugely important in our culture and will become more so if things keep going way they are. More and more people are living on their own; they are in danger of becoming more and more isolated from the rest of society. The "Me-culture" abounds: lives are centred on "me and what I need and what I want and I have my rights!" to the detriment of a sense of social responsibility, caring for others, even recognising that other people exist and that they too have needs to be met. Against that

setting we read these words of Jesus to love our neighbour, to treat neighbour as we would treat ourselves, to care for others and look after them in their needs. Love is about relationship: we care, have compassion in our hearts; then we express that love by serving others, by helping people in need, by giving our time and energy to help others. There are lots of opportunities to do that, even in our community; the challenge we face is to think not just of ourselves and what we need and we can get out of life, but to think of others and what they need and what we can give and how we can serve. See the shock created by Jesus when He turned this command into the parable of the Good Samaritan: people liked the principle, but they were challenged to see that this was not just for people we like or with whom we get on well; we are to love our neighbour in need, no matter who they are!

*"We love..." (1 John 4:19)* The gospel is all about what God has done first. Lately I was preaching a series of sermons on Romans 8; during that series I received an e-mail from someone who had been reading these sermons on-line and commented that I was concentrating far too much on what God has done for us rather than talking about what I can do for God and suggested that this was born out of some "What's in it for me?" attitude and that I must be quite dissatisfied with my life. In my gentle reply, I suggested that the gospel is all about what God has done for us and that what I do for God is a response to what He has done for the world! We love God because He has first loved us; our love is a response to His love; we love Him back because He has loved us and the best expression of that love is Jesus; He has loved us so much that He died for us. The stronger our appreciation of God's love for us in the gospel, the stronger will be our love for Him and for other people. Our love grows frail and grows cool when we forget that God has first loved us.

This is for passing on! Life is to be shaped by these two great principles; these are not only for our life, but are for passing on to others, to the next generation, to our children and grandchildren; tell them, otherwise how will they know! We need to tell our friends, the people we meet at the water-cooler or the photocopier when the opportunity arises; tell your friends when they ask you what you believe; what's life all about! This is not just for Sunday life, but is for all of life: for our working, our walking, the morning, the evening. These shape what we do here on Sunday, they shape our worship and our sense of partnership; they are also for life outside this building and for sharing with others! What will you say when they ask you "what is life all about? What matters most to you?"

*"Love the..." (Mark 12:30f)* These are Jesus' answers to big questions; this is what life is all about! *"We love..." (1 John 4:19)* The gospel shapes our life!