

MARK 12:28-34
THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS...

It is Good Friday a few years ago; it is 8am; I have gone to buy my morning paper and I go into the shop. I go to the cash desk with my paper, really only half-awake. One of the women behind the till says to me "what do you think about hell?" (She knows me and who I am!) Pardon! It's 8am and I'm being asked a theological question and I need to find an answer; I can't fob her off or make a jokey aside. She had listened to Archbishop John Sentamu on the radio earlier in the morning and he had been talking about Jesus descending into hell as part of a reflection on Good Friday. This reflection had stirred a question in the shop assistant's mind and I'm a Christian minister, so what did I think about this big question? Do people ask you questions about your faith? I was speaking to a mum at Messy Church yesterday whose 7-year old boy spent 20 minutes asking her questions about God on Friday evening as they walked home from Beavers! Do family members ask you about what you believe and why? Do people whom you know well wonder what motivates you to come to church? Or have they asked you before and know the answer? A young boy was listening to the preacher and the preacher used a big word that the boy didn't know; he went to the preacher after the service to ask him what this big word meant; the minister, who should have known better, told him that he didn't need to worry about that big word; the boy stopped asking questions!

It is Jerusalem; it is possibly inside the temple precincts and Jesus is sitting teaching. Perhaps there are small groups of people sitting round Him, listening. The disciples are there, but there are others too. Some of the religious leaders are there; trick questions are flying in Jesus' direction as these men try to find Him out, or get Him to say something they can use against Him. There are questions about paying taxes or about divorce, questions that take situations to the extreme to try to find Jesus out. But, of course, He knows what they're trying to do and always He is able to navigate His way through these tricky situations. Then a man comes; he is called a "teacher of law", a rabbi; he has a question, but this one seems genuine; he seems to be someone seeking after truth, looking to know what Jesus thinks, maybe to confirm something he is already feeling for, maybe recognising that what he's been teaching is out of step with God.

"One of..." (Mark 12:28) The Jewish rabbis had 613 individual laws on their books; they already had some kind of priorities, with some laws described as "heavy" and others as "light". There were the 10 commands, the principles on which so many of the other laws were built. There were laws that described what it meant to do no work on the Sabbath; laws about worship and religion and how to come to the temple and what kind of offerings to bring. The teacher of the law would spend his days with groups of his disciples teaching these laws and trying to encourage these disciples to keep the laws he was teaching. Did he see in Jesus someone different, who had a different take on this question? For whatever reason, this rabbi comes to ask Jesus this question – "which is the most important commandment?"

I wonder how you would answer that question! Jesus quoted His bible! *"This is..." (Mark 12:29f)* Actually He gives two commands! Love God and love your neighbour. The first comes from Deuteronomy 6 and Jesus quotes what His bible says about the greatest command, to love God with all your being, heart and soul, leaving nothing out. The second is from Leviticus 19, to love your neighbour as yourself, a command that in the Old Testament was spelled out in so many different ways about caring for people in your town or village, including widows, orphans, the stranger, the person who had no-one else to look out for them. Love God, love others – these are ways of being, attitudes, spirits to have in us; first of all, these are not things to do, but attitudes to be. These are the most important, the greatest commands and for Jesus everything else flows from these. The rabbi likes Jesus' answer – *"to love..." (Mark 12:33)* In turn, Jesus commends this man for his faith and his insight and sees the kingdom of God at work in this man; God is beginning to rule in this man's heart in a new way.

How do you describe love? I suppose we describe what love does. We say we love people, but they only see that love by the things we do: we buy flowers, we bring home chocolates, we help someone in need, we visit hospital – these are the things we do to show love, but they are not love itself. Love is a way of being, first and foremost; it is an attitude; it is a way of thinking, feeling, a way of being. To describe what it means to love God is the hardest thing I have ever tried to do as a preacher: I know it is the most important way we can ever be, to love God; I know that I try to love God with all my heart, but I can't easily find the words to describe what love for God is all about. Loving God is about seeing how wonderful God is and holding Him in the highest possible esteem; it is about putting God first in everything; it is about seeing how much God means to us. We show our love for God by being here to worship Him week by week, by reading the Bible, praying, by giving our time, gifts, energy, and money to serve God in the world – we *show* our love for God in these ways, but love for God first lives in our hearts.

We were talking in our bible study last Wednesday about our giving and the reasons for giving. Amos was pulling people up for their wrong spirit as they went to worship; they were boasting and bragging about their offerings and how much they were giving and how many offerings they were bringing. "I've got a bigger offering than you!" This is entirely the wrong spirit; there is no love for God there, just a totally selfish spirit. At end of this chapter, Mark tells the story of the widow's offering: "*A poor...*" (Mark 12:42) it was not much at all and certainly a lot less than some were putting in. But Jesus saw more than that: "*I tell...*" (Mark 12:43f) Here was a woman expressing her deep love for God by giving Him everything she had; her giving was a sacrifice because she left herself with nothing because she wanted to give everything to God. She loved God with all her heart, and she showed her love by her giving.

It is same when we think about love for other people. Love for others also begins as a way of being in our hearts, that we care, that other people are important to us, that we think about others and consider them to be as important to us as we consider ourselves. What a challenge that is – "*to love...*" (Mark 12:31) That is the way we think, the kind of people we are, as people who love and care about others. I can urge you to give to good causes, such as the shoeboxes or Tearfund, or the church and you can give as much or as little as you like. What I can't see is the reason why you do these things; what I can't do is make you do these things from a spirit of love. Love is a spirit that lives in our hearts; love is inspired by the Spirit of God at work in us; by the Spirit's work we are inspired to love, to be people who have that way of being in our hearts.

We show our love for other people in all sorts of ways. We give to charity; we look after a neighbour, maybe make some soup, or take them some home-baking; we send a card or a message; we can travel to the other side of the world to care for people who are poor in other countries. All of these, and there are lots of others, are ways of showing love, demonstrating the love that is in our hearts. There are other motivations – we can do these things out of a sense of duty and nobody else knows if that is our motive rather than love. We can do these things from a sense of self-satisfaction – "look what I have done; does this not make me feel good!" But the best motivation of all is to love other people and to care genuinely and only for the needs of others. Everything we do has to come from a spirit of love; every way we treat one another has to be shaped by love. Love is seen in what we do; the lack of love is seen in what we don't do!

Why should we love? Why should we love God and love other people? Why should we love God with everything we are, heart and soul, and love other people as ourselves? These are high callings, commands that set high standards. What is it that should inspire us to say "these are the ways I will go"? It is very simple: we love because God loved us first!" There is no other answer, no other reason; we are a people whom God has loved heart and soul; we are a people for whom Jesus has given everything. How has Jesus loved us? He has loved us with all His heart and His soul, with all His mind and His strength. How do we know that? We know

it because of what He did. He cared for people and healed the sick; most of all He gave His life on the cross for us, "*the righteous...*" (1 Peter 3:18) We love God because He loved us first; we love others because God loved us first. Our love is a response to what we see in Jesus. There is nothing complicated about that! We love because He loved us first.

What is important? "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." There are so many distractions! The rabbi who came to Jesus had over 600 other laws that he might consider, 600 distractions! What is the main thing? There are all kinds of distractions for us, church distractions, religious distractions, life distractions, all of which get in the way of the main thing. For Jesus, the main thing is simple: "love God, love other people!" What made a man like David Livingstone travel Africa with the gospel? Love! The sense that he was loved by God, constrained by that love, inspired to show his love for God and others by his missionary calling. What inspires you to come to worship? What inspires you to care for someone in need? The best inspiration is love: love for God, love for others, inspired by being loved. We love because Jesus first loved us.