

The rule of love

I think you could say that our reading from Mark's Gospel this morning is a text for today, a text for the modern world, a text for 21st century Amsterdam. And why do I say that? Well, because this is a bit of an anti-religion text, and today it goes down well to be anti-religion.

Think about it. Jesus is disputing with the religious leaders of the day who are trying to catch him out, and one of them, a scribe, comes forward and asks him a question, a very good question as it happens. This scribe is not playing games - he has a genuine concern. 'What commandment is the greatest of them all?' he asks. And bearing in mind that in Jesus' day there were considered to be no less than 613 individual statutes of the law, it's reasonable to wonder which are the really important ones. And Jesus distils that entire body of law, that entire tangle of legislation, into two commandments: 'love God and love your neighbour!' Nothing about how many sticks you're allowed to carry on the Sabbath or what variety of seafood you can have on your pizza - no. Just these two. And they both come down to love. Love for God, love for neighbour. And we like that! It seems like we're getting to the very heart of what true religion is all about. And we like what comes next even more. Because this scribe agrees with Jesus' summary and then goes further and takes a little pop at all the trappings that go with religion. Love for God and love for neighbour, 'this', says the scribe 'is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices'. This, rather than all that other stuff, that baggage that comes with religion - sacrifices and offerings and temples and priests and smoke and blood. And given that this scribe and Jesus were at that very moment standing in the courts of the temple surrounded by precisely all that paraphernalia, that was quite a controversial thing to say.

Now of course what this scribe is saying here is nothing new, in fact it's a repeated refrain in the Old Testament that no amount of religious observance counts for anything unless your religion is founded on the inner core of love and justice and mercy.

'When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?' thunders God through Isaiah of Jerusalem.

'Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;

incense is an abomination to me...

learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.'

Or again, through the prophet Amos, this stinging rebuke to the religious powers of his day:

'Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
and grain offerings,

I will not accept them...

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

And I suspect this appeals to our contemporary sensibilities. After all, haven't we had enough of religion that grows fat on externals, on rituals – all that mumbo-jumbo, but is painfully thin when it comes to love? Aren't we all fed up with dysfunctional religion that is big on rules and commandments but where there is no beating heart of justice and compassion? We've seen it in Northern Ireland. We've seen it in South Africa. We've seen it in the deep South of the USA – and now we see it terrifyingly in the spectre of so-called Islamic State where devotion to the Koran is expressed in their brutal, hateful regime. So let's get back to basics, let's grasp essentials: love God and love your neighbour – that's what religion should be all about.

The trouble with that of course is that it maybe doesn't go far enough, paring religion down to the bone of these two commandments. After all, we're increasingly uncomfortable with the first – love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. We're uncomfortable with that because we are increasingly uncomfortable with God. When it comes to God we prefer to remain agnostic if not down-right atheist. And besides, doesn't loving God with all that heart and soul and mind and strength sound a bit fanatical and doesn't it lead precisely to the excesses of ISIS? It's precisely passionate love for God that erupts into passionate hatred for the infidel, for the heretic, for the sinner, for the different. So having reduced the whole religion business down to these two commandments we maybe need to go one step further: love your neighbour. Leave it at that! If you do that you won't go too far wrong. It might stop us squabbling over God for a start – the God of my religion versus the God of yours - for surely we can all agree on love. And if it turns out that there is a

God then a life of neighbourly love is sure to keep you in good standing with him or her or whoever or whatever God is.

So, lots to ponder here in this text for a world that is deeply scarred by religion. There is, however, one big problem with this whole argument. It assumes that religion is fundamentally about us, and how we live, and how we behave, and how and if we love. The focus is all on human behaviour. Whereas the religion of the Bible is grounded not in us and our love but in God and in God's love for us. Think again of that law, 'hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God...' Go back to the Book of Deuteronomy where that commandment is first given and you find that it is prefaced by an important phrase. It is prefaced by the words, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God' and those two small words, 'our God' tell a big story. Those two words, 'our God' are freighted with the memory of how this God heard the cries of this people when they were slaves down in the land of Egypt and how God adopted them and freed them and blessed them. In other words God loved them – and that is why they are now summoned to love this God in return, in response to the love poured out and bestowed on them. And this is what our faith, our religion is really about. It's not primarily about us and our love for God and our neighbour – it's about our God and our God's love or us. That's where everything begins.

So, for example, some of you may be aware that yesterday was Reformation Day. On that day in 1517 Martin Luther, knowing that it was the day before All Saints day when there would be a big turnout at church, nailed 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg and in so doing started something that changed the world. We call it the Reformation. At the risk of over-simplification Luther saw that in the corrupt religion of his day the focus had come to be on us, on what we must do to be faithful, on what God requires of us. And Luther was trying to wrench the faith onto a different track altogether so that the focus came to be on Christ and what Christ has done for us. The clue to Luther's theology was the phrase 'Christ for us', because everything hinges upon what Christ has done for us and continues to do for us and not on what we do. And suddenly everything is set in a different key, the key of grace. And suddenly religion, faith, becomes response, response to unimaginable love. And this is what it means for us to be a Reformed Church – we dance to this tune.

So today, being All Saints' Day, we might well ask what constitutes a saint, what qualifies anyone for canonisation. The obvious thing to say is that a saint is someone who demonstrates love for God and for neighbour in a striking way, someone who loves beyond measure. But that's not a truly Christian way of putting it. A saint is not primarily someone who loves but rather someone who has been grasped by the love of God, someone so possessed by the love of God that it spills out from them. And that is why saints are so often strange people, people who are disconcertingly odd and who do not fit in and who may be outsiders, because the love of God will always strike the world as deviant and strange.

All this makes it very appropriate that we had that rather difficult reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning. At first glance it expresses everything that puts us off about religion. It's all about priests and sacrifices and the blood of goats and calves – all complex, cultic rituals centred on the temple. This is the religious stuff that the scribe who questioned Jesus wanted to downplay. He wanted to replace all that with just simple love for God and neighbour. But let's not move so fast. What that passage in the Book of Hebrews is all about is what God has done *for us* in Christ. What the writer does is to consider all the complex rituals and mechanisms that we find in the Old Testament and that were required to deal with our sin, involving priests and offerings and sacrifices. And the point the writer is making is that all that has now been gathered up in Christ. All that has been fulfilled in what God has done *for us* in Christ who became both priest and sacrifice, offering himself up fully and finally. Here is love displayed! Here is love embodied! And this is the true subject matter of religion – not our capacity to love God and neighbour, but God's astonishing love for us poured out in Christ.

To put it very simply: if only we could grasp how much we are loved, then maybe we would find it easier to love.

In a few moments we will come to the table of Holy Communion. You could say that what is done here is a religious act, a religious observance, and as such it has little relevance to a secular world which has had enough of God. Why bother with such rituals? In the spirit of that scribe who came to Jesus, isn't love enough? Well, no. For here love is displayed. Here love rules. Here more than anywhere else in your life you are loved. Here you are welcomed and embraced. Here in bread and wine God's costly love for you is poured out.

So taste, and see, and go, and learn to love God and your neighbour as yourself. Amen.

O loving, gracious God,
you love the world so much that you sent your only Son,
that whoever believes in him may not perish
but have eternal life.
Yet around us people are perishing.
People are perishing because they lack the basic resources for life.
People are perishing because of war and conflict
and our inability to love one another;

people are perishing because of religious conflict
and because of crimes committed in the name of God.

We pray today for our brothers and sisters in Christ
who face persecution on account of their faith.

Sustain and strengthen them we pray.

And we pray particular for peace between Christian and Muslim,
for love between all spiritual neighbours of different faiths...

And we pray today for you world-wide church,
giving thanks on this All Saints Day for the greater host
of which we are a part, including those in your nearer presence.

Bless the witness of your church here on earth.

We pray especially for the Church of Scotland
of which this congregation is a part.

Refresh us with you Spirit we pray and raise us up to new life...

And as we think of your command to love our neighbour
we pray for Mulanje Mission Hospital in Malaei which we support,
praying for Ruth Shakespeare, Medical Director and her staff
and asking your blessing on the fund-raising concert
held here later this month.

O God, may our giving to this project be a tangible
expression of our love...

And we pray as always of those prevented from joining us here
At your table because of sickness or infirmity.

May they know that they are held in our love for them
and in your love for us all.

And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ
Our Lord and Saviour. Amen.