

SERMON FOR 30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME 29.10.17

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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In the prayer book there is a prayer that often goes at the begging of Anglican worship. Many of you will know it. It is what is known as the “Collect for purity”. It goes like this:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is an ancient prayer. It appears in Latin in the 11th-century and was part of the preparation prayers of priests before Mass. The Anglican reformer Thomas Cranmer translated the prayer into English and from

there it has entered almost every Anglican prayer book in the world.

A part from being an ancient prayer, it is prayer full of meaning, it is a prayer that establishes right from the outset our intentions as we gather to worship.

It is also similar to a prayer said by Jews every time they gather in their synagogues to worship.

A prayer called the Shema. Some of it may be familiar to you. It goes like this:

*Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.
Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.*

*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.
And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.*

Could you pick out something familiar from the Shema? You may have noticed that the third line is

identical to something that we heard in the reading from Matthew's Gospel today.

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

This line of text was hugely important to the Jewish view of God. And it is an important text for us this morning as we consider Matthew's gospel together.

Here we have Jesus being confronted by a group of religious leaders, identified as the Pharisees. Who have witnessed another Jewish religious group the Sadducees being silenced by the wisdom and teaching of Jesus.

So they think to themselves, he may silence the Sadducees but surely not us the Pharisees. And so they ponder together a question for Jesus that may be able to silence him with. They ask “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” to which Jesus responds *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your*

might.” And also adds *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”*

And because Jesus was steeped in Jewish religious life, and knew his audience, he responds by quoting not only their Hebrew scriptures, for this verse comes from the Deuteronomy chapter 6, but that important prayer which framed the Jewish gathering to worship God.

By doing this Jesus starts to shift the religious landscape, he is emphasising that above all else, *love* is to be the principle whenever we talk of commandments and the law. As Jesus says himself, on these two commandments centred on love, hang all the law and the prophets.

So what does this love look like? What does it mean to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* And *“love your neighbour as yourself.”*

Well there seem to be two different aspects of love in Jesus' response. Love for God, and love for yourself

and neighbour. The latter has to do with a more tangible love. A love that expresses itself in justice or charity or doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. It is in fact what has come to be known as the ‘golden rule’. It is known as the ‘golden rule’ because in a sense it is easier to understand that sort of love, and this is probably one of the reasons why it has entered into the vocabulary of popular religious sayings.

But that first love, love of God, seems much more mysterious and elusive. It is not as easy to love something you cannot see, or tangibly grasp. This love is harder to explain, but it seems to be the alpha love, the most important love.

The idea of loving God has been written about for thousands of years by all different people from all different backgrounds. Sometimes it is expressed in the form of romantic love, with many modern singers using lines such as “I am so in love with you God!” But it is not only modern singers who use such language.

The medieval contemplatives from Christianity and Judaism used romantic language as they expressed love for God. For example, John of the Cross’s poem “On a Dark Night” begins with the poet “kindled in love with yearnings” and moves on to images of touch and intimacy. And *Sefer Hasidim*, a twelfth century rabbinic collection from Germany, sees in Deuteronomy 6:5 a call to love God with a passion far more intense than that of a couple reunited after a prolonged separation.

Such images of love express the strong yearning to be united with God. They may not be images that we ourselves connect with, but they give us a sense of what love for God may look like. All of this language, all of these feelings, is just another way of expressing what we may call love expressed in *worship* of God.

It is no coincidence that the line “*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” begins worship in the Jewish synagogue. In turn it is no coincidence that Anglican worship since the reformation has often begun by declaring “*cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the*

inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name.”

For one of the primary things we do on a Sunday morning is to worship. We may share conversation about our week, we may have coffee and cake together but the main reason we are here is to worship. And to worship is to love God. And from that flows all other forms of love. As St Augustine provocatively said “Love God... and then do what you like.” Meaning, our first priority is to love God.

And it is this love for God expressed in worship that helps us to be more loving to others. Yes, it is not the only way to love God, but it is certainly one of the most significant. The famous preacher William H. Willimon said this about love and worship: “Our primary mission is not to help change the world, but to be the church; to be a community that worships the God of Jesus amidst a culture that worships other gods.”

It is about recognising that love expressed in worship is the central act of the faith community. Love expressed in worship is about first and foremost recognising as Ultimate reality the Great Mystery that we name God. This will make worship different from a pep rally or a talk show or a concert or a support group session. Love for God in worship includes praise, adoration, thanksgiving, it should speak to the whole person; body, mind, heart, soul. Love for God expressed in worship should change us all of us.

It should make us more willing to love, more willing to love ourselves and our neighbours. We see this call in the words that we express throughout the liturgy, words that declare our love for God, and words that call us to be more loving.

However we are often not great at just ‘experiencing God’ as Anglicans. We have beautiful words that we read and speak, but the danger is that these words keep us in our heads. We should learn ways of experiencing God with all our senses, sight, smell and even touch in order that we may experience God more

directly. This will help us to be able to know God rather than just knowing about God, a subtle, yet powerful difference.

May God show us all new ways of expressing our love in worship, may we always be open to new possibilities and new experiences, old and new.

So that we all may be open to loving God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind.”