

Dear Friends,

Mark 12: 28-31

"Which commandment is the first of all?" That's the honest question that is brought to Jesus by a serious seeker. Is there one commandment that outweighs all the others or is there one which holds the rest together?

For his answer Jesus turns first of all to these words from the book of Deuteronomy, "Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength". These were very familiar words. Those who were listening to him would have repeated them as part of their prayers every morning and evening. The first half is more of an affirmation than a commandment. It states that God alone is God. On the foundation of this confession comes the commandment to love God.

Then, because Jesus is generous, he also gives a second commandment. Okay, you could argue that he's cheating. He was asked for the greatest commandment and he can't quite hold everything he wants to say in one, so he has to add another. But I'm sticking with the idea that he's generous. His second commandment is these words from the book of Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself".

The key word is "Love". Love for God and love for others. Everything else hangs on love. Paul knew this. He was one of the first to follow Jesus and he wrote, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law". Augustine of Hippo was another of the first Christians, he also believed that love was to be placed at the centre of life. He said, "Love God and do as you will". His idea was that if you make the love of God the focus of your life then everything else will find its proper place.

Given this, we want to know what it actually means to love. It is surely more than feelings and emotions. I remember the old story of the couple lying in bed first thing in the morning. One professes their love to the other in lofty and elevated words. Their love is boundless, their love will be undying. But when their partner asks them to get up and make a cup of tea, well, that's a bit too much to ask isn't it? Feelings and emotions can be nice but they need to be accompanied by actions.

On the other hand, love is also surely more than just following lots of rules and regulations. You can't reduce love to a code to be carefully and deliberately followed. Once again, we can turn to Paul as someone who understood this. He saw that you could do all the right things but they could still be empty if they were done without love. He wrote, "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing".

Love is not just having a warm heart and it's not just performing cold actions. It is whole hearted and it shows itself in practical ways in everyday life. Does that get us a bit closer to what it means to love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

God bless you,

Tony