

Sermon – Mark 12.28-34

On the face of it, Jesus' words here sound like a nice, straightforward summary of God's law. He expresses God's will in a way that's far simpler and much shorter than the ten commandments. "Love your God and love your neighbour" – that makes it all sound quite clear and easy.

But although it may be easy enough to say, it's not so easy to do!

Let's look at the first and most important commandment. It's actually not even that easy to understand precisely what Jesus is asking of us.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." We could spend days exploring what it might be like to love God with our hearts, souls, minds and strength. How do these aspects of love differ? What is different about the loves of the heart, of the soul, of the mind and of the strength? I suppose loving with our hearts suggests emotions, whereas love of our souls might suggest spiritual love, being close to God in prayer. Loving God with our minds might mean intellectual commitment, logically loving what he stands for, while loving with our strength would imply bodily commitment, endurance.

I suspect many of us would feel presumptuous talking about ourselves as "loving" God in some of these ways. And when we start talking about giving **all** our love, then it becomes impossible to imagine ourselves doing that. How can we possibly give God all our emotional love; be totally spiritually united with him; never doubt; give every atom of our energy and effort to him?

The second commandment is equally hard. "Love your neighbour as yourself, Jesus tells us. What exactly does this mean? While it's true that we aren't always very good at loving ourselves, that sometimes we do suffer from low self-esteem or get angry at ourselves, we do have a great urge for self-protection and preservation. On a physical level our bodies have an inbuilt reaction to keep us alive, keep us breathing. It's impossible to hold our breath – if we try our bodies take over and force us to. And although we may judge ourselves harshly, as a whole we do tend to look after ourselves. We may not always approve of our actions, may not always like ourselves very much, but we understand our own motives, make allowances. And we spend an awful lot of time just thinking about ourselves, our plans, hopes and fears. At the end of the day, unless we are seriously depressed, we are concerned about ourselves, look out for our own best interests, care for our own welfare, and sadly, we spend far more time thinking about and caring for ourselves than we do for our neighbours.

I'm not saying we're all utterly selfish. There may well be a few people in the world that we do care and worry about more than ourselves – our children, our family, our best friends. But we must not forget that the "neighbours" we are meant to love as much as ourselves aren't just our friends and family. What Jesus is asking is that we

care about everyone as much as we do ourselves - **all** our neighbours, all over the world. And that is a pretty tall order. How much time do we give to thinking about them? If we're honest, let's face it, we all spend far more time thinking about our own wishes and wants, our own fears and worries, than we do about the welfare of those throughout world.

Jesus tells us in the second commandment to love everyone, everywhere with as much care and attention as we give to ourselves. How can we find the time, the emotional energy, the resilience? How can we possibly do that?

Well we can't, any more than we can love God in the way Jesus told us to, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

And that's rather the point of Jesus' summary of the Law.

The people of Jesus' time thought that it was possible to obey the ten commandments. The religious teachers taught that if every Jew kept the 10 commandments for one day, then God's kingdom would come, and while they may not really have expected everyone to manage that, they did pride themselves on their adherence to God's law in every minute detail. They believed that it was possible to satisfy God's standards. And I think some people nowadays sometimes think the same. I've heard it said that people live good, "Christian lives". I have to say that I don't think that can be true of anyone. We don't – we can't! There is no room for satisfaction with ourselves. The standard Jesus sets here in his summary of what God wants from us is quite impossible. We can never love God and others as he commands.

That's the bad news! The good news is that God **does** love us like that, loves us to that amazing, standard that is impossible for mere humans. And we can rely on that love. God will be with us & help us as keep trying to do our best, and he carries on loving us, even though we keep failing.

And as we rely on his love, little by little he helps us to love him back and to love others. In the midst of all the current anxieties about Covid 19, and our feelings of isolation, God can give us the strength to carry on praying, and to find new ways, appropriate to our restricted circumstances, to reach out and show our love to our neighbours.