

Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18, Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2.1-8, Matthew 22.34-46

So , “all you need is love” then. That’s what Jesus seems to be saying – and it’s what the Beatles sang, so it must be true! Remember their words?

*All you need is love, love, Love is all you need ..... it’s easy.....*

Well the importance of love I will go with, but as for love being easy, I am not at all convinced.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ speaking of the importance of love comes in the hardest week of his life, those final days before the crucifixion, when the confrontations with, and challenging of the religious and political authorities that have marked the three years of his public ministry are at their height. In response to yet another question that has been asked to try and trip him up, to test him, the question “ which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus patiently explains that the most important thing of all is to love God with your whole self (verse 37), and the other most important thing that grows out of, and goes along with that first thing, is to love your neighbour in the same way you love yourself (verse 39).

From this I think we can reasonably draw the conclusion that there is no contradiction between the actions and challenging words of Jesus – remember his arguing with the scribes and Pharisees, remember his turning of the tables in the Temple? – and this message of love he preaches. The key problem in interpreting this double commandment for us, is that we have lost sight of the biblical meaning of love. Our culture equates love with intense emotion, it’s about something stronger than liking. And too often we use the command to love as an excuse to take the path of least resistance, we hold back from telling the truth when it would be uncomfortable, we try to please everybody – and we call that love. Our definition of “love” is often suspiciously undemanding of us.

But this is not the definition of love that Jesus is working with in Matthew. The Jesus we see in these stories thinks that to love God with the whole self, with “all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind” (verse 37) is demanding and risky. Following the path of love leads him, with his whole self, to jump into debates and conflicts. Love leads Jesus into all kinds of situations that are not just uncomfortable, but dangerous. Eventually, love gets him killed.

Jesus showed that to love God with all one's heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us. The truth is feelings and emotions do not enter into the equation. This is a love that we might call loving-kindness, not a passive emotion but active mercy. It is marked by patience and generosity. Loving is a choice, not a feeling.

To love our neighbour as ourselves is to make a conscious choice and to act upon it.

In a short while we will sing the hymn: Thy kingdom come on bended knee....Thy kingdom – God’s kingdom – the kingdom for which we hope and pray, the kingdom which was inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus, and in which he embodied the truth that love is nothing unless it is seeking justice.

And like the word love, justice is also often misunderstood. We can think it only means giving people what they deserve by their actions, so justice means punishing bad people and demeaning lazy people. That, however, is not what the word means in the Bible. The Bible means by justice that everyone, because they live in the community, because they are – like us - human beings, are entitled to all that is needed for dignity, peace, freedom, health, joy, and security.

Actions are of course important – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, rescuing the refugees, reaching out to those suffering from ill health in mind, body or spirit, campaigning against political decisions – yes even in our own country – that lead to many, too many, being socially and economically marginalised. It is to stay as involved in the future of our nation in the run up to the General Election as much as we were for the Referendum.

And as important as actions is prayer. Not the prayer of frivolous, selfish requests – “O God, please stop me from eating all this chocolate....”

But the pray expressed in words we will sing shortly -

*The day in whose clear-shining light  
all wrong shall stand revealed,  
when justice shall be throned with might,  
and every heart be healed: (v4 Thy kingdom, come on bended knee..)*

Prayers for justice are acts of hope. As Christians we have hope that justice will be done. We have faith that this is God’s world, and God will listen, we have faith that the world will be changed. The alternative is to fall into despair, believing that “the powerful” are unbeatable, problems too great and insoluble, and so we abandon God.

Prayer lies at the heart of what keeps us “in faith”, with hope for the world. To ‘pray always’, as Paul urges more than once, is to hope always for justice, and to trust always in the power of God.

When Jesus says “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,’ and that there is a second commandment like it ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself,’ we are - to paraphrase Walter Brueggemann, one of my favourite biblical scholars and theologians, - being commanded by Jesus to be “believers, hoppers, and naggers for justice.”

You really can’t have one without the other.