

1. Last week we had fun at our Harvest picnic. We missed those of you who could not be with us! Thank you to everyone for making it such a lovely time!

We talked then about the fact that our physical and spiritual lives are entirely entwined; you cannot think about one and ignore the other; you cannot take care of your body and not your spirit – or vice versa – and be a fully well person. God cares for all of us (in every way of understanding this sentence)! And today our theme is in some ways a continuation of that.

We are called to live integrated lives; and our generosity is an expression of that integration.

2. We have another question from a scribe to Jesus. This time, it sounds not so much about ‘testing’ Jesus as seriously exploring a genuine heartfelt question.....

‘One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ (12.28)

This question was often debated by the scribes and teachers of the day. For example, a Rabbi Hillel was once challenged by a gentile to teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. He replied, ‘that which you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law; the rest is commentary’. But Jesus gives his own, famous reply, summarised as, ‘Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.’

But notice some of the detail which gives colour and depth to this rule of life!

First, Jesus starts by retaining the first part of the Old Testament passage as the basis of what follows: ***‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’*** (12.29a). God is one! The Greeks and Romans and other pagan societies had multiple gods; a god of war, of the harvest, a goddess of wisdom etc. If you walked through Rome or Athens there were temples to different gods scattered around. But our forebears in the Jewish faith understood: no, God is one! God is integrated! God is beyond us and accounts for *every* aspect of life!

The risk for the Greeks and Romans was they ran around trying to keep every god satisfied, and playing off one against the other. The risk for us is that our believing God is one means we start to think of God in our own monocultural terms, or emphasise one aspect of God’s interest (physical, spiritual etc) over another. God is one tells us as a start: God is over *all*.

3. This sense of integration in God flows over as a call for us. Jesus reminded his listeners of the rest of the commandment....

‘...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.’ (12.30)

That means all of your being. Not just your head, your heart, your brain, your hands! And the sense of *integration* continues as Jesus carries on. Because he now juxtaposes the ‘second’ great commandment, ‘to love your neighbour as yourself.’

How do we understand this in relation to the ‘first’ commandment? Does it mean somehow it is secondary? Or follows from the first? No, it means more like ‘the other side of the coin.’ Each informs the other, each cannot stand by itself. You cannot love God and forget your neighbour and live a fulfilled and integrated life. You cannot love your neighbour but ignore God and live a fulfilled and integrated life. That is what Jesus was saying and repeating from his Jewish faith.

You may remember Moses came down the mountain with two stone tablets (inscribed on both sides) with the 10 commandments. Traditionally it was understood that the first covered the first 3 or 4 ('love God') and the second covered the remaining 6 or 7 ('love your neighbour'). But Moses held them both! They sat equally, one in each hand; he was balanced!

4. *The amazing and wonderful thing in this instance is that the scribe really seems to get this (we hear Jesus encouraging him at the close, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God!')*

Because the scribe immediately summarises his understanding by going on to state, **'this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.'** (12.33b) He has got the message! What he knows and has understood is that all our actions must be rooted from a deep place of love. If love is not the basic, deepest, foundational driver of all our being, then our relationship with God or neighbour will be compromised.

5. *Where does that leave us today, when we are focusing on fundraising for the church?*

Amy Carmichael, the Irish missionary in India in the early 20th century, famously said, **'we can give without loving, but we cannot love without giving.'** We know that truth intuitively: birthdays, anniversaries and celebrations have taught us that, as has our instinctive generosity at times of loss and tragedy. What she was saying was that the fundamental driver for Christian giving should be from a place of loving.

So our giving to the church should come because we want to love God and neighbour and see this place – this community at St John's – as a place where we can learn to work that love out in the world around us as a community of fellow travellers. Of course, it will be messy! But we cannot avoid that mess (!) as we each learn ever better to work out God's love in our lives.

We are being called to a generosity which springs from that deeper sense of love for God and world.

A former bishop once said he heard the priest pray, when receiving the collection at the front, 'no matter what we say or do, this is what we think of you!' It's not an official prayer! But it gets the point in a way!

So I would dearly, deeply love to see our church be on a sustainable financial footing. Of course I would! But we all have calls on how we manage our resources, and we need to be wise about those. What will be will be. To be honest, the most important thing for me, and I hope for us all, is that we are all growing into being deeply generous people as part of working out our faith – loving God and loving neighbour.

If our giving to the church comes from that place, then that will be a cause for celebration!