

**Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2017**  
**Last Sunday after Trinity (A)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

OT: Leviticus 19.1-2,15-18

NT: I Thessalonians 2.1-8

G: Matthew 22.34-end

I am always wary of absolutes. If you have the final word on a subject, then it probably speaks of your own intransigence rather than the finality of the matter. Of course we all try and sew matters up for ourselves in headlines and soundbites. Think of advertising slogans: there are innocuous ones, such as “Every little helps”, but “Probably the best lager in the world” contains only cursory doubt on the matter. Better still is one of the advertising slogans for Camel cigarettes in 1949: “More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette.” That may have been true, of course, but the general tone of the slogan gave an impression which, within 20 years, many would have wanted to revise.

We expect advertising to be fairly absolute in its endorsement of a product, but religious absolutism is a little more dangerous. Whenever you hear a statement which begins, “Christianity demands that...” or “the Bible tells us to...” then you should probably ignore what comes next. It is likely to reflect more on the person who made the statement than on any genuine religious teaching. This sounds like flippant dismissal of extremists, or more subtle undermining of those who do not agree with me, and of course it is. We all manipulate the subjective to ensure that our own understanding of absolutes appears unassailable. Even in the Bible we often use context to dismiss the bits we don't like.

What is interesting about the Gospel accounts of Jesus, with today's passage as an excellent example, is that very often they do seem to be unassailable absolutes. So are there bits of the Bible which we should accept without question, and other parts which we should discuss at length? In today's reading Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment. He answers, seemingly without hesitation, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The weight of Christian history has generally accepted this passage as an unerring statement, and it has been included in the liturgy at various points. But why, I wonder, do we give it more credibility than any other soundbite.

It is, perhaps, more important to ask why we have fallen out of love with some other passages in the Bible. In previous ages which were, perhaps, less critical and more accepting of hallowed verses, our ancestors might have felt challenged by some verses of the Bible, but they would still accept their authority. Now, we are more likely to dismiss what we do not accept. Some might see this as a product of creeping secularism which, with our Enlightenment values, places no value on a text beyond that assigned it by the reader. That is to say, a verse from the Bible is only important if I consider it to be so. If I disagree with and dismiss a verse, then it has no more value than a line in *Woman's Weekly*. It must also be admitted that even the most slavish biblical fanaticist is likely to ignore and dismiss the verses they don't like. Evangelicals, in my experience, often wear mixed fibres, expressly forbidden in Deuteronomy 22.11. So, we have fallen out of love with the verses which don't suit us.

At the heart of this as well is the question of what we think the Bible is. Is it a teaching document? Some regard it as such, and think that it is a list of rules to be followed – that is, of course, until it tells you not to wear mixed fibres or eat shellfish. But the unassailable absolutes are not quite as many in number as one might suppose, and much of the Bible is not commandment, but narrative. St Paul is sometimes quoted as giving rules and commandments, particularly about the status of women, or about same-sex relationships, but in fact most of his letters are like the passage we heard today from his letter to the Thessalonians: “For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.” This is not the language of absolutes and commandments, but rather the language of servanthood, and very human servanthood at that. In this passage Paul actually examines his own motives and understands that they might be misinterpreted. He says he speaks not “from deceit or impure motives or trickery” but from a devotion to God. Human words; human feelings.

That there is some narrative and also some commandments implies that we should switch our method of interpretation at different points in our reading. But this doesn't work either, because we end up with a pick-and-choose Bible. Our problem is that we also banish the divine. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and bishop, Charles Gore, first began to articulate the move from seeing the Bible as ‘dictated’ by God to ‘inspired’ by God back in 1889, but in fact there had been tacit acceptance of this position by many for generations.

So how can we relate religious absolutism to biblical authority. Let us return to Jesus’

commandments in the Gospel passage. It seems to me that they are validated by experience, and that experience might be the factor which brings together life in God and the interpretation of scripture. What are the most important commandments, Jesus is asked. Well, says Jesus, I think it is these: love God and love your neighbour. And when we do these things, we find that our lives fit together. The most intense religion which we have is that which we experience, not that which we are taught. We hunt for the objective, to try and reclaim that certainty and absolutism which has comforted centuries of Christians, but I wonder whether this is now out of reach. I wonder whether experience might be the greatest objectivity we now have. Our experience of living authentically, of being the fullness of who we are, which is in the image of God, is in itself objective and absolute. Jesus' words in the Gospel today are not 'do this because I tell you', but rather 'do this, and everything else will make sense'. In fact, he says it explicitly: after repeating that we should love God and love our neighbours he adds, "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

And that's the nub of it. In our own lives we experience the fullness of living in many ways, but principally the human experience is that through loving God and loving our neighbour we fulfil our potential to be creatures who love and are loved and who live in community. Biblical authority is not about commandment, but about experience, as Paul himself showed. And if that experience is true and authentic, then God's hand is at work in the Bible.

*Fr Crispin Pailing*