

OT: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

NT: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Gp: Matthew 22:34-46

You may have seen a clip online this week of a rather arrogant young man challenging Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic candidate for the Senate seat for Michigan in the American mid-term elections. Dr El-Sayed is a highly trained, highly experienced medical practitioner who was born and raised in the US of Egyptian parents and who is a practicing Muslim.

This young man, apparently planted at the meeting by his Republican boss, questioned the Democrat candidate about his stance on the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation which may be deemed to be radical. He did not get quite the response he was hoping for. Instead, he was questioned about his Christianity and whether he supported Christian fundamentalists. He quickly left the meeting.

The argument he got back was that all should be free to practice their religion, that we should respect and care for one another without discrimination and that violence against another is never right.

All this reminded me of a supposed legal concept: *"never ask a question you don't know the answer to"*

This principle suggests that when cross-examining a witness, it is best to ask questions that you already know the answer to, in order to avoid inviting the witness to provide an answer that may contradict your case.

A concept that the Pharisees and Sadducees were either unaware of or were too arrogant to consider when they decided to take on Jesus with their questions in order to trap him.

Last week, you may remember, the gospel reading referred to rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's after they challenged Jesus on the rights of paying taxes to the occupying Romans. In other words, as Christians our focus in life may be God's will and following his commandments but we also live in this world with commitments and duties to the wider society. So we worship God but we, as responsible citizens, pay our taxes for the good of everyone.

This week's gospel gives us the theological teaching behind this.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The Pharisees are having another go at Jesus by asking him "What is the greatest commandment" and this is the response that their lawyer gets. In Luke's gospel, not content with being put down once by Jesus, he goes in again and asks "Who is my neighbour?" And for his pains, he is told the parable of the good Samaritan, a story where it is the foreigner who is shown to be the compassionate one. Not the answer he was hoping for.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus turns on the Pharisees by asking who they think is the Messiah, whose son may he be. When they respond, "the son of David", Jesus trips them up.

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

And the point of all this? Well, both the young man and the Pharisees were so caught up in trying to look clever in disgracing an opponent, that they missed the fundamental teaching, the point, I hope, of any sermon that I have ever preached, that we are all children of God, regardless of any imposed discrimination. And being children of God, he loves us unconditionally. But that love asks of us a response, a response to care for those around us, for all humanity, again regardless of any imposed discrimination.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Easy to say, not always easy to do. God knows that there are people who annoy us, those whose ways and beliefs we do not share, those whose actions we find reprehensible. We may have to dig deep to find their good points but that is what we are called to do. As the writer of the book of Leviticus says:-

You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

It is certainly a challenge to think we must treat equally the poor and the great. And I hope he'll forgive me saying, but God is not always easy to love. I am reminded of St Teresa of Avila, shaking her fist at God and shouting, "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them!"

In the mess of the world today, it's hard to not to wonder why God doesn't intervene a bit more to straighten it out. But this the free will be bestowed on humanity. And like any loving parent, he will always be there to pick up the pieces and bring comfort and hope.

So we go on. We believe in the one, true God, the God who willingly sacrificed his Son for our sakes, the God who walks with us in this world, even if we can't always feel his presence. And in the faith and hope of this love, we find that our happiness lies not in hatred and enmity, not in discriminating and isolating ourselves but in being open to all humanity in the rich diversity that God created us. In sharing God's love, it is not diminished but rather it grows for us and for our neighbour so that the world can only be a better place where all may live in freedom and peace.

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