

Bennochy church 4<sup>th</sup> November 2012

What do we do when we come across familiar words? Do we skim read them / gloss over them, say to ourselves, 'I have been here before... I know this'; do we assume that because we know them so well, we wonder, can there be anything new for us to learn in these words? With familiar words we know the end of the story, so we don't need to read them to find out what happened. We don't need to delve into them to source their meaning, we think we have worked that out before... or have we? Do we need to revisit the familiar once again, because our lives have changed? Can old familiar words of God speak afresh into our new situations? Having said all that, have you ever watched a film you know you have seen loads of times but still can't remember the end?

*"Familiarity breeds contempt"*, we know the phrase; at some point in our lives we will have used it. I wonder if we sometimes show "contempt" to the familiar stories of scripture; the Lord's Prayer, 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and what could be better known than the great commandments. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."*<sup>31</sup> *The second most important commandment is this: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'* *There is no other commandment more important than these two.*" (Amalgam of part of Deuteronomy 6 & Leviticus 19) These are very familiar

words, and we know that Jesus expanded their scope, even to love of enemies.

I wonder if this teacher of the law is trying to trick Jesus. He might be, after all throughout the gospel accounts many did try and failed. Indeed this is the last of a series of four questions in this section of Mark's gospel. What we can say is that he seems to be the most sympathetic of the questioners. He asks Jesus, in the context of there being in Judaism, 613 commandments, a confusing array, what is the greatest commandment? It would be like us asking Jesus ..., well what would we ask? If we had the opportunity to ask Jesus any question we could, what would it be? This man seems to be seeking an answer the question of how best to live his life, serving God and his neighbour. He knows the answer to the question; he is a teacher of the Law. He wants to know Jesus answer, and this is confirmed in his words, "Well done teacher". Patronising, sarcastic?

Jesus responds in a way that relates to the questioner. This man is a teacher of the Law and so Jesus goes back into the Old Testament, to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, two of the ancient texts and law books, to find his answer. These are no new words. His response is orthodox. They represent a central plank of God's relationship with his people, from the days of Moses, down through the centuries to 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine.

These were commands never to be forgotten, to be passed on from generation to generation. Here are words integral to being in relationship with God. No wonder this answer is given, and I think expected. It would have been strange for Jesus to say anything else. Maybe some were listening in, hoping he would say something different, some new teaching that they could later on, add to their list of accusations.

The great commandments are short hand. The teacher of the Law did not need Jesus to expand them. He would have known exactly what they meant and how he should live them out. *“It is more important to obey these two commandments than to offer animals and other sacrifices to God”.*

I think today we best understand these two commands in the word ‘discipleship’, which is our shorthand, for being a follower of Jesus, a learner. If we were to expand them a bit, we might say; to love God is to love everything God has made. The strand of God that we find in scripture that says God is ‘creator’. To love God is to love everything that God has sent. The strand of God that is Jesus and the gift of the Spirit from Pentecost; our God is a ‘sending’ God. He even sends us into the world, to love ourselves, strange as that might sound, with a love from God, enabling us to love others, even our enemies, and to do that with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

This is full commitment. He is asking of this teacher of the law, and of us, everything we have. There is nothing half hearted

here. It is all or nothing; our love for God seen more and more as our choices match up with the will of God, and our love for our neighbours seen, not in how we treat our friends, but how we loves our enemies. In these words Christ challenges us. So can we echo the words of this man, who said, “It is true”. These are indeed the greatest commandments to follow.

If some went away from their encounter with Jesus sad, like the rich young ruler, this man is confirmed by Jesus. His answer is wise and Jesus says he is not far from the Kingdom of God. I hope that is what we would want Jesus to say of us. Our answer is wise and we are not far from the Kingdom of God. Amen.