Trinity 21A 25/10/2026

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Thus begins the last of Jesus’ interrogations by the religious authorities in St Matthew’s Holy Week narrative.

Jesus’ response was both typical and not. He begins his response in a rather predictable way: “‘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.” Here, Jesus is quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Jesus then goes on to say there is a second commandment – to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Here, Jesus paraphrases Leviticus 19: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Jesus then tells the Pharisees that all the “law and the prophets,” the two major bodies of text that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, are dependent upon these two commandments.

Jesus’ juxtaposition of Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 6 is profound. The Pharisees who heard the Leviticus portion in that moment would have known the entire passage, not just the portion Jesus quoted. Every Sunday we include the Summary of the Law first used in the 1928 Prayer book and our modern liturgies yet most of us fail to realise what precedes “ you shall love your neighbour as yourself,” which is, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people.” Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the Lord’s Prayer echoes this: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

As a Church of the Anglican Tradition we are greatly influenced by the Benedictine Tradition. Benedict of Nursia lived in the late 5th century in Italy and set down a rule for living in community in the last days of the Roman Empire. We Anglicans have a close connection with Benedict, as monastic communities of Benedictines were very influential in pre-Reformation England. Benedict was very clear that our spiritual life was to be lived out in community – we were not to flee to the desert or hide somewhere. We are to live in community and to worship God through communal prayer, scripture recitation (most people could not read back then) and the sacramental life.

Part of Benedict’s rule was the idea that the monastery you entered would be the monastery in which you died, and to always keep death before you as a solemn reminder of the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Benedict knew that living in community is hard – disagreements are bound to happen, other people will annoy you and you will annoy other people. Benedict, in his wisdom, knew that if you had a big disagreement with another monk or nun, our human tendency is to “cut and run” – to leave the community or relationship and find another one. Benedict, with no modern knowledge of family systems or psychology, knew that if you left the monastery without having resolved your issues with your fellow monks or nuns, invariably you would go to another monastery and – lo and behold! – have another big disagreement with a monk or nun there, usually over similar issues that drove you from the prior monastery.

I don't track people who leave parishes where I have been Vicar over some problem they feel they have encountered but I would note that when they make a big fuss about it and if they did not return to Holy Trinity the problem quite often repeats elsewhere. I suspect this is common experience in

modern church life. Of course sometimes it is better to leave a place and start afresh no doubt particularly if you have been on the end of difficulties, but it should be done graciously, reasonably and politely.

The danger is when people make a big fuss, history repeats itself, behaviour replicates itself and there is no reconciliation or opportunity for spiritual growth. This does not produce spiritual depth – it keeps you spiritually stunted and immature. We can act pious and holy all we want, but unless we do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, then our faith will remain shallow. It is so comforting to multiply the practices of the church in our life and so inconvenient to have to meet the responsibilities of the communities in which we live. Living in community with other people is hard. Recall Leviticus 19: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord." Neither the author of Leviticus, Jesus nor Benedict said this would be easy – simple perhaps, but not easy.

It's easy to say we love our neighbours in the abstract – it is much harder to put it into practice. In fact, Jesus' command to love our enemies is often easier. We tend to push enemies away and keep them out of our lives. It's easy to love in the abstract, at arm's length. It is much harder to love up close where things get messy: loving our next-door neighbour, whose dog barks incessantly and who won't do anything about it; or members of our congregation who don't see things our way or just bug us; or community leaders who don't listen to our concerns; or the priest who just doesn't get it. Well, it's hard, isn't it?

In each case, what makes it hard is the pride of our own petty egos that seek the self rather than the good of the other. Letting go of the ego is the way of the cross. As Anglicans, we inherit this Church of England/Benedictine way of being in community. Being in community means loving God and neighbour – which, by extension, means letting go of the need for fighting, vengeance and holding grudges. It is a way of spiritual transformation that calls us into becoming more Christ-like – into becoming spiritual adults.

This is the transforming power of God – and it comes to us through our neighbours who are up close and in our face. But are there neighbours with whom being in a relationship is not possible? What about those who threaten us? What about those who threaten the community?

Well, neither Jesus nor Benedict would have condoned that behaviour for the sake of loving your neighbour. Loving your neighbour is not the same as indulging your neighbour. There are behaviours people inflict on us as individuals and the community that go beyond annoyances and simple grievances. Abuse, violence and threats are behaviours that cannot be tolerated for the sake of maintaining relationship. While we can reject specific behaviours and call those who threaten and abuse to repentance, they may not respond to that call. This does not mean we cannot love them – but we may need to do so from a safe distance unless and until they can do the hard work of amending their lives and actively seeking reconciliation with us.

Yes, life in community is hard work. Holding and bearing grudges prevents us from being the loving people God has shaped us to be. We cannot love God and harbour hatred for the people God loves. We cannot presume that our dislike or even hatred of another person is how God feels about that person. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength only comes with the spiritual gift of humility to love the very people God loves too. Remember, while there are people you know

who seem unlovable, there are people who feel the same way about you. None of us is loveable all the time.

It is into this reality that grace enters. When we are at our worst and most unlovable, God comes to us. That radical, undeserved, unmerited love has the power to move our hearts to love our neighbours – even the ones hardest to love. This isn't easy work – Jesus knew that, Benedict knew that and you know it too. But we undertake it, quite imperfectly to be sure, because in doing so we experience grace, mercy and healing in action, not abstraction. Laying down our egos, our long-nurtured grudges and resentments, and seeking the way of love is the way of the cross through which we find fullness of life in Christ.

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