

Not far from the kingdom

As a rule, the Jewish hierarchy of Jesus' time – the scribes, the teachers of the law, the priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees – don't get good press in the New Testament.

Throughout the gospels, they were suspicious of Jesus, jealous of Jesus, and they tried to trick him, find fault with him, and they tried to trap him. We tend to group them as the 'bad guys' of the gospel.

It hadn't always been that way: The various groups had specific responsibilities and duties and functions, but it seems the problem was that they'd generally taken advantage of their positions.

By New Testament times, it seems they all enjoyed the respect of the people a little too much. They had come to enjoy their positions of authority and power. Listen to this from Matthew 23 where Jesus is speaking to the crowds and his disciples: *"The scribes and the Pharisees...tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others...they love to have the place of honour at banquets, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the people call them rabbi"*.

As I say, the bad guys of the gospel. Except sometimes, they're not. And that's what happens in this morning's reading from Mark's gospel. One of the teachers of the law, one of the supposed bad guys realises that Jesus has been answering the loaded questions well, and is speaking with authority.

And immediately before this exchange, Jesus had been challenged by loaded questions from the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees – the famous question about whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not, and the really convoluted one about the woman widowed seven times and the resurrection. Jesus had answered both questions in remarkable ways - in unexpected ways. The answers that his questioners hoped to receive in order to entrap him weren't forthcoming – instead they got responses from Jesus that left them confounded.

I can imagine them all going off to try and figure out new and more devious ways to oppose and undermine Jesus. Except for this one teacher of the law, who'd heard it all, and realised Jesus' answers were not just clever, but that they were good answers – in the full sense of 'good'.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (12:28)

On the face of it, it sounds like a trick question.

In fact, I sometimes use a similar questions with congregations “Of the ten commandments, which is your favourite?”, and I offer the prediction, that when you get down to it, most people’s is one of two.

Thou shalt not steal.

Because we like our stuff. We’ve earned it, or been given it, and it’s ours and you’d better not take it. Most people are pretty happy with “Thou shalt not steal”.

But often, another one trumps it.

Honour your father and mother. Which parents like to translate as “obey your mother and father”.

But our teacher of the law doesn’t ask Jesus what his favourite is, he asks him what the most important is.

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (12:29-30)

And that’s not even one of the ten commandments – that comes, as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning from Deuteronomy. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

That would seem to be a fine answer to the question that the teacher of the law asked. But Jesus doesn’t leave it there, and he says: *The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (12:31).*

So, Jesus says, it’s all about loving God, and loving your neighbour.

And it’s about loving God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And loving your neighbour as yourself.

It’s not just loving your neighbour, but it’s about loving your neighbour as much as you love yourself. And that’s a tough thing – our love of ‘Thou shalt not steal’ comes because we like our stuff. We like to look after it. We like to look after ourselves and those close to us.

Loving your neighbour is something that most people think is okay... loving your neighbour as much as yourself is a bit more of ask.

But that’s what Jesus says. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love others as much as you love yourself.

Now I haven't actually done the count myself, but I've read that Jewish Law, the Mosaic Law, consists of 613 commandments, out of which 365 of them are negative (thou shalt not) and 248 of them are positive (thou shalt).

And of course, by Jesus time, the Jewish people had added a lot more that – remember when Jesus said *“The scribes and the Pharisees...tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.”* The burdens were more rules to follow.

If we turn to Psalm 15, we see that David had a go at simplifying the rules.

Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?

The one whose walk is blameless,

who does what is righteous,

who speaks the truth from their heart;

whose tongue utters no slander,

who does no wrong to a neighbor,

and casts no slur on others;

who despises a vile person

but honors those who fear the Lord;

who keeps an oath even when it hurts,

and does not change their mind;

who lends money to the poor without interest;

who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things

will never be shaken

Rather than 613, he got it down to 11:

1. Be blameless
2. Be righteous
3. Speak the truth
4. Don't slander
5. Don't do wrong to your neighbours
6. Don't cast slurs on others
7. Despise the vile
8. Honour those who fear God
9. Keep your word
10. Don't charge interest
11. Don't accept bribes

But later, and I think a bit more eloquently, Micah simplified them to just 3 commandments:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

But here, in today's gospel reading, Jesus, brings it back to just two:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

He doesn't put the law down. He doesn't say that the six hundred plus laws don't apply. And he doesn't tell us what his favourite commandment is, either. What he does is tell us the basis of the law. The essence of the law.

The ten commandments and indeed all the laws come back to these two commandments that Jesus nominates. They all relate to either loving God or loving each other.

Thou shalt not steal – it's about loving each other.

Honour thy mother and thy father – it's about loving each other too.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me – it's about loving God.

Honour the Sabbath and keep it holy – it's about loving God as well.

If we follow both these commandments that Jesus gives, then we would be following all the commandments in Scripture.

Love God, and love your neighbour.

What could be simpler?

Well, it's simple in theory, but our experience is that it's quite difficult in practice.

We can, we should, test everything that we do against those two commandments. If there's something that we're doing – as individuals, as a community, even as church – which, at its heart isn't about loving God, or about loving our neighbours, then we shouldn't be doing it.

The teacher of the law was impressed with Jesus' answer:

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." (33-34)

It's not really surprising that he thinks Jesus is right about loving God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, because as we heard in our reading from Deuteronomy, that was central to Jewish life.

As we heard, Moses urged the nation of Israel to *"Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."* (Deut 6:7-9) This was serious stuff indeed.

It is a bit more surprising that he thinks loving your neighbour as yourself is important, because, traditionally, Jewish people are separated from others.

Significantly, though, the teacher of the law agrees that loving others is more important than religious ceremonies. Or as he puts it: more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

I say significantly, because it was the burnt offerings and sacrifices that kept the Jewish hierarchy in business. If sacrifices are important, and only priests are permitted to offer sacrifices, then it follows that the priests themselves are important.

But this shouldn't have been a surprise. Long before, the prophet Hosea had delivered God's message to the people: *"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."* (Hosea 6:6)

Or going back even further to 1 Samuel (15:22) where Samuel says *"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams"*.

So what Jesus says is not only good, but is consistent with the scriptures which the teacher of the law would have known so well.

And we read in verse 34 that When Jesus saw that [the teacher of the law] had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Mark then tells us "from then on no one dared ask him any more questions."

So what does it mean to be 'not far from the kingdom of God'?

The teacher was not in the kingdom of God, but he was not very far from it.

He didn't come under the rule of God completely, but he was very near it.

Jesus didn't say the teacher got it right... but he just said that the Pharisee was getting close.

So we can wonder what more he needed to do? He came open to listen to Jesus. He heard the lesson that Jesus was teaching, and he understood it. So why was he only 'not far' from the kingdom?

Jesus said the greatest commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your (1) heart and with all your (2) soul and with all your (3) mind and with all your (4) strength."

And the teacher responded by saying "To love him with all your (1) heart, with all your (2) understanding and with all your (3) strength"...

...something was missing.

The teacher had – perhaps unconsciously – left something out. Perhaps it was what we might call a Freudian slip. And he'd said that we should love God with all our heart and with all our understanding and all our strength.

And he'd left out soul.

I guess to love God with all your heart is to agree that God is good that his commands are good and so on. To love him with all your mind or understanding is to know what God wants of you and to love him with all your strength is to do all that you can.

But to love God with all your soul is to give your soul to him – to give your life to him. To turn to Jesus and submit to him.

Being a follower of Jesus, isn't thinking that Jesus is a good idea, and it isn't reading the bible and memorising verses, and it isn't doing good deeds. Not that any of those things are wrong, it's just that it's not the full story.

Remember this is Jesus who gave up the glories of heaven to become one of us, and to live and die as one of us, and in doing that taking the burden of all our wrongdoing on himself. And he calls us to follow him. All through life, through death and into everlasting life. To love him with all our heart and all our mind and all our strength, and all our soul as well.

Mark tells us that after this exchange, no one dared ask [Jesus] any more questions.

And I think that's for two reasons – that Jesus had successfully and faithfully answered the loaded questions of the others, and in answering the question from the teacher, he'd said all he needed to say.

Which leaves us today to ponder Jesus' words to the teacher "You are not far from the kingdom of God" and ask ourselves if we are in God's kingdom, or if we, like the teacher who came to Jesus, have a little way to go.

Amen.