

4 November 2018

Deuteronomy 6.1-9

Mark 12.28-34

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.”

These words, are at the very heart of the Jewish faith and of the Jewish life of prayer.

They introduce a selection of passages known as the ‘Shema’ – and ‘Shema’ is the first word in the Hebrew sentence meaning ‘Hear’. ‘Shema, Israel’ – ‘Hear, O Israel.’

They are words at the heart of all Jewish prayer. They will often be the first words of Jewish prayer spoken in the morning, and the last words of prayer spoken at night.

Many orthodox Jews at prayer will tie small leather boxes to their arms and forehead when they attend the synagogue, with these words written on vellum within the boxes, so that they keep them in sight and in mind whenever they worship God.

And the door-posts to Jewish homes will often have a small container with these words inside. These words are at the heart of their faith and life.

All of this is part of Jewish life and culture now, and it was part of Jewish life and culture when Jesus grew up as a faithful, observant Jew.

These would have been the first words of prayer that Jesus was taught, and the words that he learned to recite first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

He grew up learning above all else that God is one – there is one God and no other – and that our duty to God is to love him with all that we are: heart, soul and strength.

And when asked about the greatest commandment he had no hesitation, but to quote these words.

“The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.”

1. Love God with all that we are

Our relationship with God is described as a relationship of love ... which in itself is instructive and insightful.

Not simply serving, not simply obeying, not simply worshipping, not simply honouring ... but loving.

Because when we love we have to put everything into it.

- Love at its best is always more than just an emotion, a feeling
- You can't love just with words. Words are not enough.
- But nor are simply actions enough. You can't love just by 'doing the right thing' – loving involves 'who we are' and not just 'what we do'. Loving means in some way getting personally involved.

And here we are called to love God in all that we are.

In Deuteronomy we are called to love with

- heart
- soul
- strength

In the words quoted by Jesus in Mark we have another element added

- with all your mind (Mark 12)

And that's because in the environment of the wider Greek and Roman culture it was important to highlight the involvement of the mind in our love for God. For ancient Hebrew thought the heart was not simply the seat of the emotions (as we tend to use it today), it was also the seat of the understanding and so of the mind.

But in Greek and Roman culture mind and emotions were separated as two separate entities in human experience. So it was important in re-stating this commandment to ensure that everyone clearly understood that the mind is to be included as well as the heart in our love for God.

However we may want to carve up our human experience into different bits:

- heart, soul, strength
- heart, soul, mind, strength
- body, mind spirit
- physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social

the call is to love God with all that we are.

Because we vary enormously as human beings, we will each lean heavily in one direction or another in the way in which we express our love for God:

- some will be much more active in their response – focussing on practical action
- some will be much more intellectual – wanting to think through their faith
- for some the emphasis will be more emotional – wanting to express their faith through their emotions
- and others will find focus in exploring their spirituality – whether through a more contemplative or more charismatic approach to spirituality

And the church needs to be incorporated of people with all of these different emphases.

But actually, within all of us, there needs to be a wholesomeness in our response to God that embraces all sides of who we are. We need to encourage a self-awareness so that we recognise the emphasis that we lean towards, but ensure that our response to God is well-rounded.

- that what we are thinking, saying and praying is lived out in our actions
- that we haven't left our brains at home when we enter into our relationship with God
- that we don't so keep our emotions in check that we lose all warmth and vitality in our faith
- that we give space to our spirits to reach out to God – and it is all too easy to want to keep our spirits in check because we feel more in control when it comes to what we do, what we think and how we feel ...

We need to constantly work at this wholesome balance in our lives, so ensure that we are worshipping with all that we are.

2. Love God in all that we do

If we are to love God with all that we are, then we are also ... by definition ... to love God in all that we do.

I think that that is the main point of telling people to make sure they never forget. What is being said here is: “Never forget that this is what you are all about, this is what you are doing.”

It’s about keeping it to the fore of our mind all of the time.

- talk about it in your family and among your friends,
- talk about it any time of day, wherever you are
 - first thing in the morning, last thing at night
 - at home, out on the road
- have reminders on your hands and on your head
 - this is about everything you do, and everything you think about
- have reminders on your gateposts
 - whenever you are going in or going out – don’t forget this is what you are all about.

I remember one of the great tennis players – I think it was Billy Jean King, or it could have been Martina Navratilova – talking about their career, and how their coach would go to great lengths to keep them focussed on the game. One coach would hide tennis balls around her home – in cupboards, behind cushions, under the duvet – just to make sure that she was always focussing on the game.

We may need to find for ourselves those triggers that will keep us alert and help us to remember that this is what we are about ... and it should be intentional – on our minds and in our hearts.

- at home
- at work
- at play

- Sunday to Saturday
- morning to night

- with our money
- through our talents and gifts
- in our conversations

- in our imagining and dreaming
- in political decisions
- in career choices
- in spending choices

Our contemporary world wants to divide life up into different segments

- public and private
- sacred and secular

But for the follower of Jesus, there can be no divide. Whether in the public or private sphere, whether in the so-called sacred or so-called secular sphere, we are called to be about the business of loving God with all that we are.

3. Through everyone that we meet

Jesus puts alongside this command to love God with all that we are, the 'second command' – to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Jesus is asked about the greatest command ... and he has no hesitation in calling us to the love of God. But neither can he leave it at that. Because to love God has certain consequences, and the primary consequence is that we will love our neighbours as ourselves.

You see, we sometimes get love wrong, and think that having exclusive loving relationships means that we have to restrict the love offered to others.

It is certainly true that God wants us to offer him a love that we offer to no others ... but he also wants us to be extravagant in the love that we show to all.

Love at its richest and healthiest can be both intensely exclusive and unremittingly inclusive.

Sally and I, as husband and wife, have an exclusive relationship. In our marriage vows we committed ourselves to a life-long relationship with one another. The

kind of love that we have for one another ... we won't turn and look for that kind of love in anyone else.

But the deep and exclusive bond of the marriage relationship makes a platform for love to be shared.

The parents' exclusive love for one another at its best enables that love then to be shared with their children, without their love for one another being threatened, nor becoming any less exclusive.

It is when things have gone wrong in love when people are forced to make choices – "it's either the children, or it's me".

And beyond the family, our exclusive love for one another does not prevent us from having healthy and fulfilling relationships with a whole wealth of other people. Indeed, at its best, our love for one another will encourage such friendships, and will not be threatened by them.

One of the marks of an unhealthy controlling attitude in a marriage relationship is when one of the partners (either husband or wife) prevents their spouse from having any meaningful relationships outside the home. Demanding an exclusivity of attention like this is unhealthy and restrictive.

God's relationship with us models that same kind of intensely exclusive and unremittingly inclusive way of loving.

He asks us to love him in a way that we will love no other ... to give him all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

We will give him a love, a worship and an honour that we will give to no other in our lives. He has an exclusive place in our hearts, because he is the one Lord of the world.

But his love for us is such that he also wants us to experience the joy of living in open and loving relationships with others in the world. So he sets us free to love one another, and indeed to love him through our love for one another.

And in all that we know of Jesus, we discover that that love is to be shown to all without limit. And indeed in showing love to others, we show our love to God.

In the parable of the sheep and goats Jesus says, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.”

So here is the call on our lives:

To love God

- with all that we are
- in all that we do
- through all whom we meet

But remember this, our love is only ever a responsive love. We love because God first loved us.

“This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and gave his life as an atonement for our sins. And not our sins only, but the sins of the world.”