

“Does Jesus give us a law?”

Summary of a sermon preached at St John’s Essendon on Sunday 1st November 2009
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In recent times *inter-faith* relations have come to the fore. If the human race is to survive in peace and with harmony, the major religions must learn to understand and appreciate each other - and to work together.

Common ground is what Jesus and the scribe in Mark 12: 28-34 shared. Faithful Jews of that time (and still today) recited the Shema (meaning “Hear”). “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The Shema comes from the time of King Josiah and his reforms. That was a time of corruption and of decaying faith (rather like today?) and Josiah instituted reforms to re-establish the faith. Central to this reform was teaching. Like today, the next generation needed to hear the story, to internalize it and to act upon it. Read Deuteronomy 6: 6-9 for a wonderful “education programme”!

This teaching, as today, was more than words. It included walking examples of faith. Faith is contagious. As someone said years ago, Christian faith is “caught” rather than just “taught”.

Jews had many hundreds of commandments in the Torah or “Books of Moses”. In Jesus’ time it was a point of debate as to which was the greatest of all these commands or laws. So the scribe puts a common question to Jesus, and he gets a double answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. The second is this: you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12: 30f). The second part is from Leviticus 19: 18. Other rabbis of Jesus’ time taught people these commandments, e.g. Rabbi Hillel said: “What you yourself hate, don’t do to your fellow; this is the whole Law; the rest is commentary; go and learn it.”

Jesus put the same teaching in positive form - as it appears in Leviticus - but with two important developments. It was rare for the two commands to be put together so closely. Jesus saw the two “loves” as two sides of the one coin. As I John 2 says, you cannot truly love God without loving your neighbour as well.

Second, Jesus developed the idea of “neighbour” in a new direction. In the OT a neighbour is a fellow-citizen, a fellow-Israelite, but Jesus taught that the neighbour is anyone we may help. The parable of the Good Samaritan shows this clearly. The question is not so much “who is my neighbour?” as it is “how can I truly be a neighbour?” Jesus crosses the usual boundaries of family, race, religion and economic status.

The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich taught that “love” in the broader context of society (involving people we don’t know and shall never meet) translates as “justice”. Love of neighbour is about action and not just feeling well-disposed.

To sum up:

- (1) Teaching of the young is crucial, and we need to use the capacities of family, of technology and of church life.
- (2) A life-style is part of teaching, and this involves a contrary set of values to the hedonism and “personal fulfillment” syndrome of our time.
- (3) As Christians we are part of the wider family of humankind, and we, like Jesus, must cross the barriers of race, of nationality (think of asylum seekers), of religion and of economic status.
- (4) As Christians we restore those who are lost, bind up the broken-hearted, support the weak and seek remedies against injustice: this is love in the form of justice.

Two final thoughts:

Parts of the Bible are hard to understand, but not all of it. The American writer Mark Twain said: “it isn’t the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that worry me: it’s the parts I do understand!”

If Christians are to be credible witnesses to the Gospel of Christ, we shall need to find ways of working together. The ecumenical movement is vital for today. Christian unity is part and parcel of the inter-faith task that awaits us all.
