

Pentecost 21
25/10/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

Matthew 22: 34-46

Of gods and loves

In a sentence

Our love of each other is always coloured by the influence of a 'higher power' which tells us what love is; the question then is only whether that power gives the fullest of life to us and to all.

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

With these two commandments Jesus summarises 'all the law and the prophets', and so indicates what it means to be a human being from a Jewish – or Christian – perspective: to be human is to love God, and to love those around us.

Jesus addresses, then, not only 'religious' people but all who consider themselves 'human'. And so at this point we *can't* hear him if we consider ourselves non-religious, and we will likely *mishear* him if we consider ourselves religious. For we don't quite know what being a loving human person has to do with a relationship with God.

The dual love command is heard by many to be an optional religious command (love God) joined to a universal, non-optional secular one (love each other). Those who don't believe in God – and many who do – hold that we don't need God to be good to others. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to show that God might make no difference at all.

Consequently, believers find themselves in the position of being like non-believers in all things ethical *except* in the apparently optional love of God.

This situation has arisen, at least in the West, because God seems too small to matter: we can get along quite well without this little extra addition to our lives together. 'Let's not let a little thing like God come between us', the happy atheist tells us. Believers are, for the most part, *confused* by this because it seems to make sense: are there not many outside the religions who are morally better than many inside? Do we not want to encourage that good which happens without inserting God into the picture?

Yet the problem here is not really that God is too small to make a difference. Rather, in the churches and *therefore* in the world, God is usually too *large*. *As an idea*, God lacks the concreteness of the tangible human world. We can give an account of the world and our place in it without reference to God. A place might then be found for God at the beginning of all things and perhaps at the end. God is then at best the sphere *within which* the action takes place but otherwise not part of the action itself. Such knowledge of God is like the knowledge that the world is round when, in fact, for all intents and purposes, it is pretty flat just here. This God has no *intrinsic* connection to us, and so plays no part in what we do, whether in love or hatred.

So, *is* the love of God simply an optional extra for those who just happen to be religious? Yes, God is optional, if we mean the too-large God who sits outside of everything we do; No, if God is in fact much *smaller* than we usually imagine, and integral to everything we do.

We realise that God is a little smaller than usually suspected when we recognise that believer and non-believer alike *already* love some god or other, and that the pertinent question is not whether God should be 'added' to our loves, but asks about the nature and identity of that god which is *already intimately active* in our lives.

Whether it is explicit or not, believers and non-believers alike have a 'first commandment' of some sort which precedes the command to love others, and so tells them what it *means* to love others, whom to love, and how much. This prior commandment speaks about a higher concern, a higher loyalty, which shapes those relationships we have with other people. We might not identify this higher loyalty as a 'god', yet it *functions* that way for us as we give it something like divine status in our lives.

This higher loyalty is woven into our identity and interprets for us our race, our gender, our nationality, economic status, and so on. And so, on the basis of the spirit of the age in which we live, perhaps black skin 'means' something different from white skin, being a man gives different freedoms from being a woman, those with more money are subject to different laws from those with less. Within social systems that allow such differences, *observing* the social expectations the community sets in place for us *what it means* to love. To love someone is to act toward them according to how our culture tells us we should, given their age, sex, race, and status.

And so, for example, in Australia we try to love 'one another', but don't so much love asylum seekers. We tell ourselves that we don't have to love them as much as citizens because Australia – as a nation – is 'ours'. By 'ours', of course, we mean Australia as the nation of those who took the land from someone else who also didn't have to be loved as we love each other because the British empire was clearly more deserving of this place than those who were already here. Loyalty to our society and its economy, or values we have about skin colour or cultural formation, tell us what 'love' is. We have 'love filters' for race, culture, gender, education, age, and so on.

In acting according to well established social mores, we honour the god in the machine which permits or limits us in our relationships with others. It doesn't go too far to say that we are 'loving' the spirit of our age as we act towards others according to the spirit's rules of engagement.

It is too easy, then, to say that we can love each other without loving something else – without loving a 'god'; *we are already loving something else* as we seek to love other people. In other words, there is always something *between* us and those we love (or not). We delude ourselves if we imagine that our efforts to love are innocent, and we refuse to take seriously the quiet whisperings of the powerful social, cultural and economic influences around us and within us. We tell ourselves that we do not need a god to tell us how to love but in reality it is precisely such gods as these which tell us what love is and is not. We may well have 'invented' the gods, in the sense of giving them names and building temples for them, but they were always there, intimately close, telling us who we are and how we should be. A simple, secular 'love your neighbour as yourself', then, without a reference to the other 'loves' which are *not* our neighbour, doesn't tell the truth about us and love.

And so it becomes impossible to dismiss Jesus' double love command as a religious option joined to a non-optional universal and secular one. The dual command to love does not *prescribe* a requirement for human beings but, implicitly, first *describes* our condition: your love of others is determined by a *prior* love, a prior set of conditions and qualifications of what is required of you.

Our love is shaped by our gods, our gods revealed in how we love. Rather than being a problem, then, the call to love God is now a question: on what basis *do* you love? To love (a) god is not to insert some vague spiritual dimension into our relationships. That dimension is already there, and is much more than 'vague' in its effects.

Jesus' invitation is to love the *particular* God who is revealed in the way Jesus himself loved. This love was one of openness to all he encountered, while at the same refusing to be constrained by the lesser gods which had power over them.

This love was one which refused to deal in death as a means to an end, and so refused also to fear death when it was used by others as a means to limit him.

The exchange between Jesus and the God he loved is unconditionally concerned with life. This is what Jesus presents to us in miracles and teaching and his simple willingness to be with us, whoever we are: a lively light which reveals the shadows in our midst and invites us to step out of the dark into that light.

To grow in love is not simply to be nicer to those around us – although surely this would be a good thing! To grow in love is also to come to see what has made us less than the lovers we were created to be, and to suspect that there is yet more painful truth God will reveal about us. The command is there for a reason – we have not yet achieved love, of which the world in which we live is ample evidence.

If what God reveals about our love is painful, we do not fear that pain but embrace it. We embrace it not because the pain is good but because it might make us want to put behind us what has come between us and God, us and each other, and so made us less human than we could be.

Love embraces, exposes, heals. It is to this that God calls us, and this that God gives. Let us receive it with joy.
