

Readings:

Deut 6.1-9

Mark 12.28-34

I watched a documentary on TV recently about an ancient civilisation in South America, the Chimu people who lived in what we know as Peru

The Chimu civilisation thrived, amassing great wealth building huge cities with palatial residences for the ruling elite. They had also constructed a series of canals that allowed water from the rivers to irrigate vast areas of desert making the land productive.

Part of the programme focused on the discovery of the remains of about 15 children whose wounds suggested they had been sacrificed to appease the gods.

Those studying the ancient civilisation have linked these sacrifices to changes in the weather caused by El Nino which mean high rainfall which flooded, destroyed the canal systems and many of their crops.

To appease the gods so as to avert the flooding children were sacrificed.

Recently I was listening to a person who held the view that all faiths are equally valid.

I don't share that view.

I am pleased that Christianity is far removed from beliefs like those of the Chimus.

It thrills me and lifts me to reflect on the heart of the Christian faith and to again to be reminded in Deuteronomy that the foundation is love.

God's love for his people becomes evident in the book of Exodus.

It is implicit in creation and in God's care for Adam and Eve, and also for Noah, Abraham and others.

It becomes explicit in Exodus.

It is first mentioned in the Song of Miriam, where this woman of faith gives voice to a great truth that had been running deeply under the surface but never quite vocalised.

In her song of praise she exalts God singing, *in **your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.*** (Ex 15:13).

Miriam recognised the unfailing love of God.

She looked at the way God had led her ancestors and more recently how he had led this people out of slavery in Egypt – and in this she saw the love of God.

Later we hear the words of God proclaimed to Moses as he went a second time to receive the commandments, *Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, **abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands,** and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.* (Ex 34:5-7).

The very nature of God is love, an abounding and abundant love that was sufficient to maintain love to thousands of people.

In Deuteronomy we have a wonderful image of love when God. Reminding the people of Israel of his care for them in the desert we read, *There you saw how the Lord your God carried you, **as a father carries his son,** all the way you went until you reached this place.* (Dt 1:31).

We carry children when they are tired, when they are sick, hurt or injured.

We carry children when they lift their arms to us for a cuddle.

We carry children when we want to express our love for them.

We carry children holding them close to our hearts, rocking them in our arms and giving them comfort.

What a wonderful picture of love that God carries us like a son, like a daughter.

In these and many other verses in the Old Testament we see the foundation of love.

The key is God's love for us.

God's love for us is a strong foundation for each and every life.

This love enables us to respond in our love for God.

In New Testament times the Apostle John summarised this by saying, *We love because he first loved us.* 1John 4.19

Christianity is about a loving relationship with the God of love.

It speaks of God's love reaching out to save us and of Jesus love in dying for us.

Christianity explains how this loving God adopts us into his family and how the sign that we are followers of Jesus is that we love one another.

God's love is central to the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Because God loves us we can love him.

Just in case we thought the command we are looking at today, the command to love God with all we are is too hard for us, God promises to empower us to do this.

Later in Deuteronomy we read, *The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, **so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*** (Dt 30:6).

This imagery points to a spiritual work in each of our hearts that enables us to love God.

In a very comprehensive and holistic way, God loves us and calls us to love him (and others) while at the same time providing the grace which enables us to love him.

Our text today is Deut 6.4-5 *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 strength.* (Dt 6:4-5).

These verses are of paramount importance and are at the very heart of the gospel.

These are among the Old Testament words we find on Jesus' lips.

Those who are familiar with the bible will recall that Jesus quoted these verses, and particularly vs 5 as the great commandment.

I mentioned last week, that although Deuteronomy is unlikely to be our favourite bible book, Jesus quoted from it so often that one scholar suggests it was his favourite book in the OT.

It is important to notice this because it helps us to understand:

Jesus knew this book,
trusted it as God's word,
drew strength from it
and used its truth to teach others.

Jesus' approach to this book should inspire us to read it and trust it.

We are probably more familiar with these verses from their New Testament context than the original Old Testament context.

The stories are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are sufficiently different to suggest Jesus may have had different conversations around these verses.

These verses were, and continue to be, central to the Jewish faith, so it is likely they were verses Jesus used in different contexts; and also were verses the teachers of his day were likely to quiz him on.

The conversations in the New Testament may have different elements to them, but they centre around these two verses.

The question is asked, what is the most important or the greatest commandment?

Judaism generally accepts there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament.

From early times the number of laws and the relative importance of them was a matter of debate and discussion.

Rabbis formed schools of thought around the interpretation of the commandments and developed detailed descriptions of how the laws were to be applied.

It is little wonder Jesus is asked his opinion on the commandments.

In Mark's gospel we read his answer,

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.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mk 12:29-31).

In Matthew's gospel Jesus adds, *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*" (Mt 22:40).

In Jesus view these commandments were so important that not only were there no other commandments greater than these, but in fact all the commandments hinge on these two.

You might like to take the time later to look at Lev 19.18 which speaks of loving your neighbour.

It follows a number of commands about neighbours and how to treat others.

But today our focus is on Deut 6.4-5

Hear O Israel.

I suppose every married man here has been draw out of his own thoughts with his wife saying, *are you listening to me!*

Why does this tend to happen just at the try is being scored, the six is being hit or the villain is being revealed?

I don't know how that timing thing works, it is an uncanny ability.

I don't want to get men into trouble by giving away our secrets, but at that point most men are trying to find the rewind button in their minds to replay the last few words she said so as to be able to answer in the affirmative, *Yes Dear ... you said ...*

Moses is saying to the people of Israel – are you listening, do I have your attention, are you concentrating on what I am saying to you!

This is like a sergeant major bellowing “ATTENTION” to call the troops to order. It is a summons and a call to focus.

It is a command to listen, to tune in to what is being said.

It is used in verse 3 and verse 4 of our reading today.

Pay attention, Pay attention – this is important, profound, the key thing to learn from this book.

This is the drum roll, the flashing lights and the trumpet call to make sure everyone is taking notice and concentrating on what is being said.

It is more than simply hearing what is said, it is a call to take to this to heart.

It is to listen in a way that engraves it on the heart and inspires you to act, to obey.

These verses are known in Judaism as the Shema.

Even today, Orthodox Jews say these verses as a prayer twice each day.

These verses are at the centre of the Jewish faith and are the great commandments of the Christian faith.

These verses teach the monotheistic view that there is One God.

The word used here does not simply mean one in number, it means unique, only or alone.

There is a suggestion that it is not a numeral, but at title, that God is the One.

The scholar Peter Craigie writes: *As one God (or the Unique), when he spoke there was no other to contradict; when he promised, there was no other to revoke that promise; when he warned, there was no other to provide refuge from that*

warning. He was not merely first among the gods, ... he was the one and only God and as such he was omnipotent.

If time allowed it would be interesting to study this and explore what it means that God is the singular deity, eternal, existing without cause, without rival and without equal.

Just start taking your mind down that track and you will soon find yourself out of your depth, out of words and beyond your ability to grasp who God is.

But it is certainly worth pondering.

I think many people today would find it surprising to read in the Old Testament that God commands us to love him and that love is the greatest commandment?

I think the general perception would be the commands and laws of God are to stop us having fun.

Somehow our community has come to perceive Christians more as killjoys than as joyful.

And that they think the commandments of God are designed to consign people to a narrow, joyless, boring existence.

I don't think society in general sees the commandments of the OT as a loving gift from God to enrich our lives.

Do we treat the commands of God as a gift of God's love and care for us?

It really does make a difference if we see them this way.

If they are a burden rather than a joy some people might just give them lip service.

Some might obey them when it is convenient.

Some might just give up as if they are too hard.

Some may ignore them as antiquated or irrelevant

Some may struggle on with them out of a sense of duty.

The only real motivation that will enable us to obey the commands is love for God

Love will motivate us from within.

Love will empower that extra effort when going is hard.

Love will bring integrity to our efforts, because we are not working from ulterior motives.

Love will pick us up even if we have failed or fallen and give us the strength to try again.

Love will help us to see the relevance of the commandments as a framework in which to maintain a relationship with God.

Love will assure us it is worth the sacrifices we make.

This command is, ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*** (Dt 6:5).

We should note here that in this context **love is not a romantic emotion** to simply warm our hearts.

It is not a mere token that can be put in a keepsake box, stored in the cupboard and looked at every now and then.

Love is action, *For God so loved the world he gave ...*

In Deuteronomy that love is shown by keeping God's commandments.

Jesus followed this pattern with his disciples saying, *If you love me, you will obey what I command.* John 14.15

Love is made visible by the acts it inspires.

Love is seen by how it shapes our actions.

In the Jewish context **heart referred to the core of your life**, the seat of emotion and place of thinking. It included the Greek idea of mind.

Soul was the breath or life within us, our very being and self.

Strength was our inner resources, the strength of our bodies, and also the source of our efforts and abilities.

This verse points the intensity of love, heart multiplied by soul multiplied by strength.

It is the laser like focus of aligning all these together in a way that intensifies love.

The verse also points to the all-encompassing comprehensive nature of this love.

The love is not partial, not confined to only one area of our lives.

There is a wholeness to this love that involves every part of our lives and every aspect of our living.

I think one aspect of our human problem is that we don't mind loving God with part of our heart, part of our soul or part of our strength.

We are often people of divided loyalties.

Many people want some degree of connection with God, maybe a side bet of going to church at Easter or Christmas in order to stay on God's good side just in case it is needed.

Perhaps a tick in the census because of a vague sense of connection with a church.

Maybe we had an uncle who was a minister or an experience of faith as a child and we don't want to let go totally, but then again we don't want to be fully committed.

Here we are called to love God fully, totally, with all we are.

What difference does this make to us?

We can rejoice that our relationship with God is based on love.

This is wonderful.

Who would have thought that the creator of all that is would invite us to be part of his family, to love him and be loved by him?

Who would have thought he would show us such great love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?

Who could have imagined God would demonstrate his love to us while we were still sinners, counting him our enemy and rebelling against him?

Who could have thought that his great command would be to love him?

This sounds too good to be true, and that is why we call it good news.

Our relationship with God is not based on the great power God could use to dominate us in a bullying fashion

It is not based on greed, whatever God can forcibly take from us.

It is not based on some effort of our own whereby we are wealthy enough, sufficiently powerful or extremely clever, so that some of us might be able to have a relationship with God, while the poor, weak and uneducated have no chance to reach God.

God hasn't dangled a relationship before us that is out of our reach.

In fact at the end of Deuteronomy God says, *Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.* (Dt 30:11-14).

God calls us to love and makes it possible for us to love.

It is of great joy and benefit to us that God calls us into a relationship of love - where he loves us and we love him.

One of the aims of our church is to *live in love*.

That is love for God, love for each other, and love for the people of our city and world.

As we come to our centennial we should grasp this command to love with both hands.

We should reaffirm love for God and others as a foundation in our church life.

We should make it our aim to set this church on a trajectory of love for the next 100 years - a love that will benefit our

community because we both proclaim the good news to people and become the good news of love among them.

Can you imagine the difference it would make in our city if we and our sisters and brothers around this city loved God with all our heart, soul and strength?

And if we allowed that love to become visible in practical ways through our actions, our character and behaviour?

What would your workplace be like if such love became more evident?

How would you show you love for God on the shop floor on in the office?

What would you be willing to give to express that love?

How would that change your schedule in the coming week?

Where would such love take you in a next month?

Let's be the church God calls us to be!

Let's allow our love for God to overflow into every aspect of our lives.

All this to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.