

Reflection for Pentecost 16 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: The first commandment is this:

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, with all your soul,

with all your mind

and with all Your strength."

The second is this:

"Love your neighbour as yourself."

- the words of the summary of the law: words which we hear week by week as part of the introduction to confession. They are words which reminds us of the two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbour. By quoting these two commands together Jesus is highlighting the inseparable link between them - a link based on God's love for us and our reciprocation of that love towards both God and those around us. This is not some legal reciprocation, an "out of duty" act, but a direct response to God's unmerited grace and love to us.

As the author of 1 John puts it like this in chapter 4 verse 19 ***"We love because God first loved us."*** It's love that is shown in its fullness as we look at Jesus, in his incarnation, sharing our world of pain and suffering, and then dying and rising again for us. Thus, our love of God cannot and should not be separated from the love we show towards our neighbours.

To quote 1 John chapter 4, again as the author puts it uncompromisingly:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

The way we treat those around us reflects the true centre of our lives - we cannot split our lives in compartments that do not relate to one another. The religious and the secular are not separated, much as we may want at times to keep them apart. Our Christian love for others should be as visible in all setting, at home and work, as well as in church.

For us to have one set of values in one setting and another in a different setting is to walk a dangerous tight rope from which we will ultimately fall.

That is one of the key points Jesus is making in the parable of Lazarus - a parable directed primarily at the Pharisees, who had just ridiculed him over his attitude to money in the parable of the shrewd steward, which we heard last week.

To illustrate his point Jesus tells the story of two men, whose circumstances are very different.

One is rich. He has everything money can buy - the finest and most expensive clothes, the best food. If the story were told today it would, I suppose, be a large detached house in extensive grounds, a fast expensive car, and all the latest technology. In fact everything he could want to live a life of enjoyable ease.

Lazarus has nothing.

If life could deal a bad hand, it had done so for poor Lazarus. His health was poor, to put it mildly. He was covered in sores from head to toe, he could not work, he had no home and no social security system to provide even for his basic needs, he was forced to eat what was thrown out by the rich man. In effect, he lived on rubbish.

Two men whose contrasting lifestyles could hardly be compared, yet who lived only yards from each other.

The rich man has no major failings or faults, he lived a good life. However, one thing was wrong - the very focus of his life. He lived only for himself. He had every opportunity, with his wealth

and position, to make something worthwhile of his life, to influence and work for justice and equality - yet his concern was only for himself. He could not spare any of his wealth even for the poor, helpless beggar, Lazarus, sitting at his gate.

The condemnation he faced was one of "self-first".

How often are we guilty of the same charge? We live in a world that so often looks to self, to the individual, and appears to care little for the injustice that surrounds it.

Having set the scene the parable now moves forward in time. Both men meet with death and find their roles are totally reversed.

Lazarus is pictured now at in Abraham's bosom, reclining at a great feast, in a place of honour close to the great patriarch; an image that contrasts well with that of the rich man feasting during his life on earth.

The rich man by contrast now finds himself in hell, or to use a Jewish word, Gehenna - a place of fire, darkness, worms, howling and gnashing of teeth!

Yet even here the rich man is still thinking of himself.

'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

Abraham reminds the rich man that he had everything during his life whereas Lazarus did not.

'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony'.

It is as this reality begins to dawn that the rich man's concern turns to his family, still living on earth. He is concerned to see they do not fall into the same trap;

and he requests that Lazarus be sent to warn them - effectively rising from the dead.

Abraham's reply is simple and to the point - your family already have scripture.

'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

The point being made by Jesus, as one commemorator has put it, is this: *"If a man cannot be humane with the Old Testament in his hand and Lazarus on his doorstep, nothing - neither a visitant from the other world nor a revelation of the horrors of Hell - will teach him otherwise"*

Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to whom he was speaking to see that what they say they believe in the religious part of their lives must affect what they do and how they live in the secular part of their life.

I will always remember a phrase that I heard one bishop use on a number of occasions and sums this up completely.

"If Jesus is not Lord of all, is he really Lord at all"

How true that is?

The rich man in the parable may have been religious and the Pharisees certainly were, but for all that to be real, it needed to be reflected in every part of their lives - the secular as well as the religious.

The challenge is the same for us today our love for Christ should be something that touches aspect of our lives. It should be reflected in the way we show love and concern to those around us, not just in words but in actions as well. Our love of God must come alongside our love of our neighbour.

Let me finish again by quoting 1 John and then inviting you to reflect with me, for a moment or two, on our own lives.

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.