

**Call to Worship**

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking today:

‘Into your presence we come, Lord God, into your dwelling place, acknowledging we are but dust before your holiness. A thousand years are like a day to you, a day like a dream, like a blade of grass renewed each morning, and yet you love us. Make us glad to worship you this day and reveal to us your glorious power. Let us worship the Lord!’

**Hymn CH4 489 – Come down, O Love Divine,**

**Prayer of Adoration & Praise**

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

God of love, our foundation and source, we stand in awe of your unending love for your beloved children, we know that your great love is given freely and in abundance for all whatever or whoever we are.

God of love, we give thanks this day for the message, for the commandment, to love and to be loved. Guide us in our journey to truly live as you have commanded, teach us to love you, to love our neighbour, and to love ourselves.

God of love, it is the greatest of your commands, and though we strive to live each day attempting to fulfil it, we too often fail. In a world of conflicting allegiances and distractions, where hate is easier than care, help us to know your love.

God of love, teach us to know a love that is patient, kind, and giving that seeks justice and equality for all, that eschews the easiness of discrimination and prejudice for the brilliance of a world, a community, a life lived in the warmth of true love, given freely, for and to all.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

### **Reading: Matthew 22: 34 - 46 (taken from The Good News Translation)**

#### **The Great Commandment**

<sup>34</sup> When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher," he asked, "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

<sup>37</sup> Jesus answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and the most important commandment. <sup>39</sup> The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' <sup>40</sup> The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments."

#### **The Question about the Messiah**

<sup>41</sup> When some Pharisees gathered together, Jesus asked them, <sup>42</sup> "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose descendant is he?" "He is David's descendant," they answered. <sup>43</sup> "Why, then," Jesus asked, "did the Spirit inspire David to call him 'Lord'? David said, <sup>44</sup> 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies under your feet.'

<sup>45</sup> If, then, David called him 'Lord,' how can the Messiah be David's descendant?"

<sup>46</sup> No one was able to give Jesus any answer, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

#### **Hymn CH4 503 – I will offer up my life,**

## **Sermon – ‘Totally Devoted To You’**

Imagine the scene – it is the Men’s Singles Final on Centre Court at Wimbledon and you have front row tickets. I will leave it up to you to decide which players are on the court. Maybe, it is Roger Federer against Rafael Nadal, Pete Sampras taking on Andre Agassi or John McEnroe pitting his wits against Bjorn Borg.

It is the final set of a tense five-hour long encounter and the match ends with two of the most stunning games that you have ever witnessed. Where the winner does everything right and with ease. In the first game, his opponent served, and each serve was met with a return that won the point. Then, in the final game of the final set, each of the winner’s serves were clean aces. Game, set and match.

As we turn to our Scripture reading today, we come across a situation which could be described in a similar way. The answer the opponents could not question, was followed by the question which they could not answer. Once more, Jesus is in conversation with the Pharisees and once again, they are looking for a way to ‘trip’ Him up. A way for them to arrest Him.

Now, if there was ever a group of people who approached life and religion differently from Jesus, it was the Pharisees. For, they were a group of people who lived their lives completely by rules. For them, the very essence of religion was to obey the rules and regulations of the Bible. Their aim in life was to obey all the commandments of the Old Testament – all 613 of them, of which 365 begin ‘*Thou shall not...*’ and the other 248 begin ‘*Thou shall...*’. Therefore, the very essence of the Old Testament religion, for the Pharisees, was to know and obey all 613 commandments.

Therefore, like the tennis match we thought about earlier, the Pharisees come to Jesus and , in verse 36, they serve their first question: “*Teacher,*” he asked, “*which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” You can just hear the anticipation in the voice of this teacher as he expects to catch Jesus out. Yet, Jesus replies with an answer that most of those gathered around Him would have expected to hear.

You can find it in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy at chapter 6, verse 5. Jesus replies: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* This is the greatest and the most important commandment.' However, Jesus is not finished there, for He adds an additional, an extra to his answer from chapter 19 of the Old Testament Book of Leviticus: *'The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'*<sup>40</sup> *The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments."*

Jesus encapsulates the whole Law on two commandments, revolving around one word. That word is: Love. It all sounds so easy, doesn't it? So wonderfully straightforward. Or at least it does, until we realise that the 'neighbour' Jesus refers to is not just the people who live in the house next door to ours. Or even the person 'sat' closest to us this morning. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and to you and me today: 'love everyone, everywhere, with the love that you love yourself with.' What a challenge, which we may suddenly begin to feel overwhelm us by its scale and the enormity of our responsibility.

Far from reducing the demands God places upon us, these two commandments, suddenly intensifies them. For, instead of giving us a list of things to avoid, these commandments should challenge each one of us to explore what we can do. Even during a global pandemic. For, the list is endless, there is virtually no limit to the level of human need in our world.

People are living in ruined cities and countries. People are losing loved ones. Others have lost their jobs and do not know how they will feed their children in the weeks and months ahead. Some have lost their business and with that also their homes. Governments seem cold and uncompassionate. Charities, Churches, and others seem to be 'stepping in'. The needs are starkly visible each night on our television screens. There are thousands of people in this world, who are in desperate need of a little kindness. A little compassion. A little or a big bit of love.

Now, I know what you are thinking ... we cannot respond to every cry for help, and I don't for one moment expect that Jesus intends us to do so, but He does

expect us to respond as best we can. Our response to others must always be the acid tests of our commitment. Indeed, it is cited in the First Letter of John as the truest measure of our love for God.

The Nineteenth Century Christian novelist and poet George MacDonald was regarded by C.S. Lewis to be his literary master. MacDonald wrote everything from grand Victorian novels to Christian fantasies. He also kept an extensive correspondence and in a letter to his daughter, Mary, when she was sixteen, he tried to explain to her, his understanding of how God's love could be a determining factor to guide her life.

*He wrote, 'God is so beautiful, and so patient, and so loving, and so generous that he is the heart and soul and rock of every love and every kindness and every gladness in the world. All the beauty in the world and in the hearts of men, all the painting, all the poetry, all the music, all the architecture comes out of his heart first. He is so loveable that no heart can know how loveable he is – can only know in part. When the best loves God best, he does not love him nearly as he deserves, or as he will love him in time.'*<sup>1</sup>

This is the kind of love that Jesus is speaking about when He answers the Pharisee's question. For, faith begins with God's love for us and our love for Him in response, but it cannot end there, for wherever our neighbour is in need – God is in need too – asking us to tend His wounds.

The Pharisees have served their question and Jesus has returned His answer and now, it is Jesus go to serve them with a question of his own. He asks in verse 42: *'What do you think about the Messiah? Whose descendant is he?'* Now, to us this may seem to be one of the most obscure things which Jesus ever said. I will admit that I spent quite a while on Thursday morning, trying to work this out by reading commentaries and 'figuratively' bashing my head of the wall.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited as the quote of the month for June 2002, at Golden Key, an 'on-line resource for all things related to Victorian novelist, poet and Christian fantasy writer George MacDonald (1824-1905) ([www.george-macdonald.com](http://www.george-macdonald.com))

At one stage, I decided it would be easy to gloss over verses 41-46, but the more I read, I began to realise that Jesus is re-emphasising the point that the Pharisees do not fully understand Who the Messiah really is.

The Pharisees give the answer that they would expect; after all they know the Old Testament, inside out: *'He is David's descendant.'* Yet, they do not see the bigger picture or the complete answer. If the Messiah was simply 'David's descendant', then the Pharisees, are referring to a simple man who would become king and would win military victories over Israel's enemies. Surely, such a figure would hardly encourage the people to love God with all their hearts, souls, and minds, and also their neighbours as themselves.

Jesus goes on to quote Psalm 110 to the gathered Pharisees: *'Why, then ... did the Spirit inspire David to call him 'Lord'? David said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: Sit here at my right side until I put your enemies under your feet.'* By quoting Psalm 110, Jesus is pointing out to the gathered crowd, that it is not adequate to call the Messiah, 'David's descendant'. He is not 'David's descendant'; He is 'David's Lord'.

There are numerous examples in the Gospels of people referring to Jesus as 'David's descendant', yet, in this small reading in front of us today, Jesus is saying that it is not enough to call the Messiah that. It is not enough to think of Him as a 'prince of David's line and an earthly conqueror'. You must go beyond these titles for the Messiah is **actually** the Son of God. For the Messiah is David's Lord.

The Son of God did not come to win military victories. He has come in terms of sacrificial love. He will not lead a mighty army like David. He will go to the cross to demonstrate God's love for everyone. And, yet the Pharisees still do not understand and because they do not understand, they have no further answers. All the Pharisees can do, is stand there, feeling overall, uncomfortable. Maybe, some were stood in awe, because in this man Jesus, they have just had a glimpse of the face of God.

Let me finish today by moving away from the world of tennis to the world of music. Some years ago, there was a song which was in the charts, from the hit

musical *'Grease'*, with the title: *'Hopelessly devoted to you.'* It was a song about love. A love sufficiently strong to overcome hurt and rejection in order to establish a lasting relationship. There is a sense, though on a far deeper level, in which this title perfectly sums up the attitude of Jesus towards humanity.

Jesus has already arrived in Jerusalem and the knives are out for Him. His enemies are determined to silence Him, and Jesus knew this as well as anyone. Yet, He carried on questioning the Pharisees. He carried on teaching. He carried on healing. He carried on setting His face towards the cross. Refusing to be deflected from His path. Jesus went willingly to His death. Despite all it cost Him, despite all the emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma He endured, just like any other human being.

Why? Quite simply because Jesus love us. Jesus loves you. His devotion to us is greater than any we might show Him. Yet, we must try to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our souls and with all our minds and we must try to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

That song title from *'Grease'* could have been written about Jesus, except for one thing; Jesus love was not/is not hopeless. It was anything but – Jesus love brought hope, healing, grace, joy, and life to all. Jesus love brings all of these things and more today. How can we not try harder to keep the two greatest commandments today? If you know Jesus, then you will know that in Him we can see something that is truly wonderful.

For in Jesus, we see the God who is totally devoted to you!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Song for reflection – 'A new commandment I give unto you'**

## **Prayer for Ourselves and Others**

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Ever loving God, mother and father of all, creator and guardian of everything that we perceive, we come together today, in praise and joy to give thanks for your love and to rejoice in the gifts you have given.

We pray for our world, which has been terrorised by the implications of Covid-19. We ask for your eternal protection on those who work to keep your beloved children safe. In a time where the interdependence of all people has become ever more evident and yet the divisions that plague our societies have become ever more obvious, we ask for the boldness to acknowledge our prejudice and to work for justice for all peoples.

We pray for your church, for the individuals who make up this body of Christ, and for the institutions that organise and facilitate the gathering of your church in community. In this time of change, and hardship for a people who have lost the privileged position once occupied by Christians in the western world, help us to see the gift that this can bring to guide us towards a simpler, faithful church, focused on love of you love of our neighbour and ourselves.

We pray for each person here today, as we each chart our own path through life, seeking to do good, at times succeeding and at times failing, that we may each find strength in your love to live well and show the radical love offered in and commanded by your son today and every day. Amen.

**Hymn CH4 519 – Love Divine, all loves excelling,**

## **Benediction**

As we close our time together and return to our daily rhythms may we find ways of loving God with our hearts, our minds and our souls and then pay it forward to our friends, family, and neighbours. Go now with God's love sustaining you today, tomorrow and every day. And may the blessing of God Almighty, Father,

Son and Holy Spirit, be with you and all whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.

**Recessional** – ‘The Lord bless you and keep you’ – John Rutter