

## Sermon for 18<sup>th</sup> May 2025

When we recite the Creed, after this sermon, I must ask a favour of all of you. Please do not do so whilst standing on one leg. I understand the temptation to do so. It may be regarded as a pious and worthy act, to recite our beliefs whilst only having one foot on the ground, but I must ask you to refrain from doing so. If you can agree to that, I shall proceed.

I mention this one-leg business because of a passage in the Talmud. This is the great compendium of Jewish scriptural scholarship and discussion, in which the opinions of rabbis are recorded, and stories are told about the events which caused them to reflect on the Bible. One such story illustrates the difference between two famous rabbis, and the schools of interpretation which followed them; their names were Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel.

*On another occasion a heathen presented himself to Shammai saying, Convert me on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one leg! [Shammai] drove him away with the builder's measure he was holding.*

*He came to Hillel [with the same request], and [Hillel] accepted him as a convert. [Hillel] said to him, Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you! That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary, go and learn!*

This story illustrates, in typically vivid Talmudic manner, the distinction between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel. Shammai was a rigorous and literal teacher of the Law, whilst Hillel was a more flexible and liberal interpreter. On being asked to sum up the whole of Torah, the whole of God's Law, in the time an arrogant unbeliever could stay standing on one leg, Shammai waved a stick in fury and drove the man away. On being asked to do the same thing, Hillel offered a distillation of the Law, the rule which we know as "do as you would be done by" or "love thy neighbour as thyself".

I wonder whether it is significant that the stick that Shammai used to drive off the heathen was “a builder’s measure”, since Hillel gave the man a metaphorical builder’s measure – a canon, or rule, against which to measure what he read in the Torah. In either case Hillel’s final instruction is telling – he does not say “Now you know everything”, but “that is the whole Law, the rest is commentary, go and learn!” Hillel’s acceptance of the man into Judaism was the beginning of a lifelong process of studying the Bible and living according to its teachings.

I was reminded of the story of Shammai, Hillel and the man standing on one leg because today’s readings have a lot to say about the Torah. In one reading Peter is shown in a vision that all manner of creatures excluded by the dietary laws are clean, and he is prompted to see the Holy Spirit as sanctifying those outside the Law as well as those inside it. In the other reading, Jesus sits at the Last Supper and tells his apostles that he is giving them “a new commandment”. That commandment is that they should “love another” as Jesus has loved them. In both cases, I think, we could easily misunderstand. We could see the stories as showing that the Bible, and specifically the Torah, what we call the Old Testament, is pointless and disposable. Peter can do whatever he likes, the apostles just have to love each other, that can replace the scriptures. But I think that would be a mistake.

On the contrary, these stories seem to be using the commandments to reveal something even deeper and more powerful; the God who gave those commandments. The collection of animals shown to Peter is a revelation from God. He may well have been meditating and reflecting upon the dietary laws before he fell into the trance, and his vision used those laws to tell him something crucial about what God was doing around him, and it called him to join that action of the Holy Spirit. The “new commandment” Jesus impresses on his disciples shows them that all the other commandments are to be understood through God’s love, and as expressions of it, and as a commission to show that love to the world.

This “new commandment” is also a summing up of Jesus’ identity and his work in the world. After all, earlier in the Gospels, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees to tell them which was the greatest commandment, and he gave this answer:

*Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

Those are two very famous parts of the Torah - indeed the first, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind” is known as the V’ahavta in Judaism, and is part of one of the most regularly-used prayers. Jesus makes an intriguing connection by saying “the second is like unto it” – to love thy neighbour as thyself is “like” loving God with all heart, soul and mind. We might interpret his words in several senses – that it is “like” the first commandment because it involves loving, that it is “like” in importance because someone who does not love their neighbour has not understood what it is to love God, and it is “like” loving God because Genesis says that humans are made “in the likeness” of God.

And when Jesus later gives the “new commandment”, this theme of love reappears. The disciples are to love one another as he has loved them. This can be seen as a reworking of the commandments he quoted to the Pharisees. Not only are they to love God *and* love their neighbours, but to love their neighbour *as* God has loved them. The two greatest commandments have become intertwined as cause and effect, as love given and received, and returned and increased.

Indeed, the two ideas become so bound up together that it is not quite clear at first in the text where the clauses end and begin. Ancient Greek does not have punctuation marks, and the verse runs – and here I must apologise for my very halting attempt at reading –

ἐντολήν καινήν δίδωμι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους·  
καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπᾶτε  
ἀλλήλους.

You can hear those “agapate”, loving, and “allelous”, each other, repeating and turning round. This is more than an instruction, this is a revelation of the nature of God and an invitation into the hidden life of the Trinity. That giving and receiving of love is how many theologians understand the movement and relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons of God.

Here Jesus seems to open up that divine life, showing that humanity has already been swept up in the movement of self-denying love which is the Incarnation and the Atonement. In doing so, of course, Jesus also reveals his own nature. Where the word “God” stands in the commandments he previously quoted, the word “I” now stands. Once again these commandments are used to show the nature of God – endlessly loving, self-sacrificing, reaching out. And like Rabbi Hillel’s response to the leaning heathen, it does not give a simple or glib answer. If the basis of Christian life is to love as Jesus loved, then we will be spending a great deal of time studying the scriptures, opening ourselves to God in patient and repeated prayer, taking part in the sacramental life of the Church, which seeks to enter the mystery of Christ’s continuing life. There is no builder’s ruler which can reject us as not measuring up, or scare us away with its row of gradations, there is only the invitation into that delighted and devoted life of love. It is that which we celebrate in the sacraments, which we try to come closer into by our worship here, and which we confess when we say the Creed. And for various reasons, it is probably best if we do it with our feet on the ground.

Amen.