



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church October 26, 2014

## Matthew 22: 34-46

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We are about to enter another election, and elections are all about speculation about people's choices. In one of the commentaries, the writer tells of the game he imagines as each week preachers throughout the country choose which reading to focus on from the Lectionary. Like the election coverage on television, there would be a big map with colours reflecting the different passages and a read out of the polls. He told this story as a way to say that, this week, it's not even a contest – of course people will choose Matthew's story of Jesus and the commandments. Not very many will consider the death of Moses from Exodus or Paul telling us how humble he is in Thessalonians. You don't need a survey, or historical data, or a big map of trends. Preachers will choose the commandment to love; and, most probably, the commandment to love your neighbour. It's familiar, it's powerful and it's as though the old commandment has come from the lips of Jesus himself! But that's selling this passage short, there's more to this passage from Matthew than "love your neighbour". Luke's version with the parable of the Good Samaritan has coloured our reading. Here is the Gospel of faith in Jesus Christ trumping religion.

The Lectionary is inviting us to look at the basis of our faith by combining two stories that work like a summary of all that we have looked at for the last four weeks, the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. The heart of this passage, indeed the heart of these two chapters of Matthew, is a theological contest between the understanding of scripture and the will of God amongst the religious leaders and Jesus understanding. This is a contest that was replicated decades later when the first members of what we call the church were excluded from the synagogue. In simple terms, the understanding of the religious leaders had become "we are the people of the Law"; Jesus was calling them to become the "people of God". Last week this was an issue of allegiance, the week before it was about attention to the call of God, the week before it was about producing the fruit of God's kingdom and it began with the issue of authority. Here, all of that is summed up in these two questions – which commandment is the weightiest and whose son is the messiah? The answers to those two questions hang on whether you see yourself as a child of the law or a child of God.

Having seen that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, a lawyer from the Pharisees comes to Jesus with a question that he thinks will test Jesus; “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Now, the Greek scholars will take issue with that translation because the word ‘the’ is not in the original; the question may better be translated “which of the commandments carries greatest weight?” However you translate the question, why is it a test? Surely not all the 613 commands are of equal importance? I think the test was one of orthodoxy, as Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, could he meet the standard of the Pharisees? And, sure enough, Jesus answer is orthodox; he quotes from the Pharisees favourite book – Deuteronomy – and their favourite text – chapter 6, verse 5, part of the Shema that opens every service in the synagogue. However, Jesus adds another text with the description ‘like’ – meaning of similar weight or importance – that comes from the favourite book of the Sadducees – Leviticus. Rather than take sides in that conflict, Jesus shifts the question from Law to enactment. It’s very important to love God but it is equally important to show that love to the people around you. He, in effect, shifts the question from religion to living; from Law to God. You could love God by spending your time studying scripture and Law, or by spending your time in the Temple praying, or by being holy through separating yourself from the difficult, messy, unruly world; but that is not all there is to loving God. That’s loving God with your heart and your soul; loving God with your mind – that part of you that puts the heart’s feelings into action – calls you out of the scripture, out of the Temple and out of your self-imposed exile to love people. God loves the world and calls people to the same love; you are not just people of the Law, you are people of God.

What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he? This may not seem to be a related question, but it speaks to the understanding of God and the will of God. While there was no single view of the messiah in Jesus day - probably that is why Jesus told the disciples not to use the word – this question goes to the issue of understanding God. Do you see only the God of the past, and promises recorded in scripture, or are you open to the God of possibilities, of wonders, miracles and newness? By pointing to scripture outside of Law, Jesus is opening the religious leaders to a much grander and more mysterious God than they represented or followed. You are not just following the God of Moses, you are the people of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of faith and possibilities.

The other underlying issue in this passage, and in the whole section, is one of polemics. It is too easy to read all of these as a criticism of the religious leaders of Jesus day and leave it at that. As I said a few weeks ago, these stories were written down for the church, not the synagogue; leaving a clear question as to what is the point for us? These are our texts, so what are the attitudes that are like the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians and the scribes and lawyers today? Attitudes that we are being warned to

avoid. Do we, like that lawyer, try to find an executive summary of the faith and ignore the complexities and interrelatedness of scripture, tradition and experience? Or do we set priorities in our acceptance and respect for parts of scripture? Luther tried to get rid of the Epistle of James because it had so little to say about God and Jesus as the Christ, but it has a lot to say about justice and righteous living. We are not people of scripture, we are people of God; a God who continues to speak and act even if we haven't included it in scripture. Do we, like those lawyers, limit God and faith to the letter of the law, because words like love and faith and justice are too slippery and undefinable? The commandment is to love your neighbour and we respond, "Who is my neighbour?" The great split between the Western Church and the Eastern Church, 1000 years ago, was in part over the wording of the Nicene Creed – does the Spirit come from God or from God and Jesus? And many splits and factions in the church have grown from similar interpretations of scripture and commandments rather than a focus on God.

We are the people of God in Jesus Christ who have been called to respond to God's grace through love and service. We have a set of scriptures and traditions to guide us, but they should not define us or limit us, or define God or limit God. Let's interrogate and wrestle with scripture to try to find that guidance, but always with the view that God is greater than scripture. We pray "Your kingdom come", may that kingdom come in unexpected, wonderful and mysterious ways. Ways that come from the grace and love of the God who calls us to faith and discipleship rather than religion and texts. Amen.