

The Two Great Commandments and Prison Ministry

[NOTE: This was my first devotional as new Executive Director given at M2/W2's Annual General Meeting, May 21, 1998.]

Matthew 22:35-40

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Frankly, I struggle to understand the picture of God I find in some Scripture. This is especially the case when I read portions of the Old Testament. I am heartened nonetheless by the realization that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God to us who summed up the Hebrew Scriptures as above ("*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*"). Whatever is difficult to understand in Scripture must first pass through the sieve of the revelation of God in Christ according to John and Hebrews 1. Jesus is the "key" to unlock the interpretation of all Scripture – something he demonstrated himself, as you remember, after the resurrection with some despondent disciples on the road to Emmaus.

All Scripture points to Jesus. No Scripture is to be interpreted apart from our understanding of Jesus. For we know God best, the texts in John 1 and Hebrews 1 say, when we look most fully into the face of Jesus Christ. This insight is beautifully summed up in a passage in II Corinthians (4:4-6) that goes like this:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

So the Bible calls us to:

Hebrews 3:1

....fix [our] thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.;

and again:

Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

And yet again in Colossians 3:1-3:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

In Luke's version of the Two Great Commandments story, chapter 10, an expert in the Law asks Jesus:

Luke 10:25

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus asks him what his answer would be, which, the expert says, is to fulfill the Two Great Commandments. Then Jesus tells the legal expert:

Luke 10:28

“You have answered correctly, Do this and you will live.”

Now, clearly the lawyer hadn't done “this” ! So the text continues:

Luke 10:29

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

So Jesus tells a story to answer the expert's question, about a traveller falling into the hands of thieves on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho. And he asks of the expert at the end, who was the neighbour to the wounded victim? The expert replies:

Luke 10:37

“The one who had mercy on him.”

Then,

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Christian philosopher Ivan Illich says this story with indiscriminate mercy at the core is the *quintessential new thing introduced to the world by Jesus Christ*. Secular Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt declares that *all-inclusive mercy is Christianity's unique legacy to humanity*. One must add: *if only this was the face of the Church consistently seen through the centuries!*

On another occasion, Jesus said:

Matthew 25:40

... ‘I tell you the truth whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

The first point I want to make, then is: *If we do not show mercy to the neighbour, we do not show love to Jesus, and we do not know God. “Love” means drawing a circle of mercy and inclusion around the neighbour near and the enemy afar. This insight contradicts all Christian support for destruction of domestic enemies (criminals) and international enemies (through war). And of course law enforcement and politicians constantly use the rhetoric of “war on crime/drugs”. Wrong and wrong-headed according to Jesus. Paul adds:*

II Corinthians 10:3-5

*For though we live in the world, **we do not wage war as the world does**. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*

The writer of I John states bluntly (4:20):

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.

But there is more, that takes us to the depths of our constituted humanity, *to what makes us most fundamentally tick!* To explain, listen to this story and commentary recounted by Father Thomas Hopko, an Eastern Orthodox teacher:

I recall a televised discussion program in which we were asked what was most important in Christianity. Part of what I said was that the only way we can find ourselves is to deny ourselves. That's Christ's teaching. If you cling to yourself, you lose yourself. The unwillingness to forgive is the ultimate act of not wanting to let yourself go. You want to defend yourself, assert yourself, protect yourself. There is a consistent line through the Gospel – if you want to be the first you must will to be the last... I said ... that there is no self there to be defended except the one that comes into existence by the act of love and self-emptying. It's only by loving the other that myself actually emerges. Forgiveness is at the heart of that.

As we were leaving a venerable old rabbi with a shining face called us over. "That line, you know, comes from the Torah, from Leviticus," he said, "and it cannot possibly be translated 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself'. It says, '*You shall love your neighbor as being your own self*'." Your neighbor is your true self. You have no self in yourself.

After this I started reading the Church Fathers in this light, and that's what they all say – "Your brother is your life." I have no life in myself except the one that is fulfilled by loving the other...

This in fact is what Desmond Tutu describes as the African concept of *ubuntu: a person is a person through other persons*. He describes this in a book on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission he headed in post-apartheid South Africa under Nelson Mandela, whose title says it all: *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

Father Hopko connects this to our being made in God's image as Trinity: *God as Trinity is fundamentally relational. So are we humans*. Hopko adds:

But if that is my reality, and my only real self is the other, and my own identity and fulfillment emerge only in the act of loving the other, that gives substance to the idea that we are potentially God-like beings. Now, if you add to that that we are all to some degree faulty and weak and so on [unlike God], that act of love will always be an act of forgiveness. That's how I find and fulfill myself as a human being made in God's image. Otherwise, I cannot. So the act of forgiveness is the very act by which our humanity is constituted. Deny that, and we kill ourselves. It's a metaphysical suicide.

Our neighbour is our only true self! **That is the second point.**

We therefore do criminal justice work and prison visitation for certainly more, but for no less than, the following two reasons:

1. *Jesus is repeatedly encountered in our acts of mercy towards the other, including the prisoner.*
2. *Our true selves are only discovered in constant work for the well-being of the other, including the victim, the criminal and the community impacted by crime.*

Now, *if* we in fact see “*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*” (the II Corinthians 4 text I quoted above), and *if* we invariably see the face of Christ in “*the least of these*” (Matthew 25), it stands to reason that we *always* encounter God in the prison – if we have eyes to see at all and open hearts!

Therefore, *if* we do not go to the “prison of our choice”, or to similar places, and discover Jesus *and* ourselves in the prisoner, in the hungry, in the destitute, etc., *we ultimately fail to discover God at all – for all our pious worship and protestations!* For Jesus is to be found supremely and finally only “*in the least of these*”.

The Two Great Commandments are after all really two sides of the same coin. Love of God *is* love of neighbour *is* freedom – *for which Christ has set us free* (Galatians 5: 1)! Imitation of God is none other than “*living a life of love*” (Ephesians 5:1& 2), the ultimate purpose of the atonement (why Christ died).

This is of course the thrust of the two specific allusions to prison visitation in the New Testament:
Matt 25:36

‘*.. I was in prison and you came to visit me.*’ – Jesus;

and the statement in Hebrews (13:3):

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners...

The full implication of living out this kind of consistent life ethic towards others is breathtaking, very hard undertaking, and radical to the core of our humanity! May we all nonetheless continue to be challenged **to find the prison of our choice, and discover Jesus and ourselves there.** In so doing we are set on the long road to freedom with God at journey’s end.

Amen.