**Matthew 22:34-40**

**The Greatest Commandments**

I’ve had 4 school visits to the church in the last couple of weeks and I really enjoy them: a great chance to interact with young people in the Parish - and they always ask such deep and profound questions.

 On one of the visits, there was a Muslim girl who was asking about the Bible. And she was really struggling with how we can critique Scripture and how we can say that this bit is history, and that bit is story and so on…

 And, of course, for this girl the heart of the problem was a basic misunderstanding that many of us make in our own lives, which is to do with the relationship between the Bible and the Koran. For this Muslim girl, the Koran is the completely infallible, pure Word of God, and therefore must be absolutely accepted as truth in every way. And she was viewing the Bible as our equivalent to the Koran.

 As Christians, we hold the same understanding too, which is why so many of us can’t understand why Muslims get so upset when the Koran is mishandled by non-believers. We don’t get that upset when people mistreat the Bible, so why should they get so upset when people mistreat the Koran?

 But here is the fundamental misunderstanding: the Bible is not the Christian equivalent to the Koran. Jesus Christ is the Christian equivalent to the Koran.

 For the Muslim, the Koran is the absolute Word of God given to humanity. For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the absolute Word of God given to humanity.

 When we understand that, then we can be more empathetic to our Muslim brothers and sisters and they may be able to understand our attitude to the Bible.

 We love the Bible, we hold the Bible in high esteem, we respect and value it because it is the book through which God has inspired humans to teach us about God. But we do not revere the Bible – we revere Jesus Christ. We do not worship the Bible – we worship God. The Bible contains the Word of God through the words of human beings. It is a wonderful Book because of what it achieves for us: it teaches us about God so that we can live our lives as he wants us to and be effective in our discipleship of Jesus. As Paul says in our first reading today: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living.”

 What an amazing Book! What a privilege it is for us to have the Bible in our lives!

 And so God wants to inspire us, teach us, rebuke us, correct us and give instruction to help us live our lives the right way. But what is the right way for us to live? What is at the heart of our following Jesus?

 Love.

 As simple as that.

 Love.

 It’s all about love. Love for God and love for other people.

 So when we hear these words of Jesus from our Gospel reading about love, he is speaking into the very heart of what it means for us to be his followers.

 But teaching about love is nothing new – it wasn’t anything new in Jesus’ time, either: every major world religion teaches about the supremacy of love. Jesus knew that too, which is why he says in Matthew 5:46: “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same.”

 But Jesus, in this passage we are considering this morning did teach a certain quality to love that is important for us to understand if we are to grow as faithful disciples. And there’s four things I want to consider from this passage concerning love.

**1. The first thing to say is that love, as a Christian, should be mission-oriented**

I’ve been at St. Andrew’s nearly four years now and you will have recognised by now that my only agenda as Vicar here is to encourage and equip us to be a mission-shaped church. We are shaped by the five marks of mission, we talk about mission constantly, we strategize for mission, we plan for mission, we constantly seek new ways to be effective in mission.

 But mission, at its most fundamental level, is not an idea to talk about. It’s not a strategy, its not a plan. Mission, at its most fundamental level, is just love. Nothing more, nothing less.

 By encouraging St. Andrew’s to be a mission-shaped church, my ministry is geared up towards encouraging us to be more loving: that’s all there is to my ministry.

 And in this passage, Jesus begins by telling the teacher of the law that love is firstly a mission activity.

 The teacher of the law had sat and listened to the debates going on around him and he approaches Jesus and he says, “Which command is the first of all?” Now, both Mark and Matthew record this incident and Mark’s account is slightly different because Jesus response begins with these words: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

 The teacher of the law had asked Jesus for a commandment and Jesus had given him a proclamation.

 Jesus is quoting back to the teacher of the law the first part of the Shema, which is recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4; something that every pious Jew would recite every day of their lives.

 And what is at the heart of this great proclamation about God out of which springs love?

 That God is *our* God, the one God; we are brothers and sisters together living in a relationship with the Almighty, the Creator of the Universe, the one God deserving of worship and praise. And everything else springs from that wonderful fact.

 And so love derives from this great truth, this incredible experience we are called into and love must be mission-oriented, as we seek to draw others into this experience. This is the truth that we are called to proclaim through word and deed, caring for those who are sick, helping those in need, rejoicing with those who rejoice, mourning with those who mourn. But always praying that we will have the opportunity to share Christ with them, to tell the Good News and invite them into a relationship with the Living God, who is the way, the truth and the life.

 Christian love begins with proclamation and, for that reason, Christian love is mission-oriented.

**2. Secondly, we see from this passage that Christian love is also demanding**

Jesus continues in verse 37, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

 Now this is a very important verse for us for two reasons.

 Firstly, and this may seem an incredible thing to say but it is extremely rare to read in the New Testament about our love for God. I say that this seems incredible to believe because almost all of our worship – our songs, hymns, and liturgies are based around us expressing love for God. But actually, that is not a common theme in the New Testament at all. In fact, as far as I can see, our love for God is only mentioned twice in the Gospels: here and in Luke 11:42 and only five times in Paul’s letters.

 Our love for God is not a common theme in the New Testament. But what we read about over and over and over again is God’s love for us.

 So because it is rare for the New Testament writers to mention our love for God when they do, we ought to sit up and listen and recognise the importance of the statement.

 But secondly, this is an important verse because there is a clever interaction going on here between Jesus and the teacher of the law. The teacher of the law was an intelligent man, a thoughtful man, a learned man, and he asks Jesus which is the first commandment and, keeping true to the tradition of the both of them, Jesus replies with the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4.

 But look what Jesus does here. The Shema in Deuteronomy says: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” But when Jesus recites the Shema to the teacher of the law, he says: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

 Jesus has slipped a bit extra in here – “with all your mind”.

 Here he is, talking to a teacher of the law, a man who has devoted himself to enquiry about God, developing knowledge of God and Jesus adds this little bit extra just for him – “love God with all your mind”.

 It’s almost as if Jesus is saying to the teacher of the law - bring everything into your love for God; everything you are, every aspect of your personality, all your work, all your passion, all your learning – everything that God has made you to be: use it all to love him.

 And that’s the demanding nature, I think, of Christian love - that God wants all of us, not just a part. We are called to love God unconditionally and wholeheartedly, without any reserve at all.

 There is a wonderful youth worker called Roy Crowne, he works for Youth for Christ. And I remember many years ago in a sermon he was giving that he talked about members of his youth group. And one would say to him, “Is it OK to be a Christian and still go to the pub?” and Roy would say, “No, it’s not”. Another would say, “Is it OK to be a Christian and still listen to non-Christian music?” and Roy would say, “No, it’s not”. Another would say, “Is it OK to be a Christian and still watch soap operas on TV?” and Roy would say, “No, it’s not”.

 And he said that, not because he believed there was anything wrong with going to the pub, or listening to non-Christian music, or watching Eastenders. The problem was the attitude behind the question: “Is it OK to be a Christian and still [dot dot dot]?”

 Roy was saying that this question betrays a certain attitude of mind, that the person asking was willing to give most of their life over to Jesus but wanted to hold a little bit back for themselves.

 And that’s the problem: we can never be a Christian and still…whatever…

 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Absolute, unconditional love – a demanding love

 Now, of course, we fall short of that time and time and time again and, because God loved us first, he always forgives and accepts us back. But that mustn’t stop us giving ourselves afresh to God each day and renewing our commitment to a life of discipleship and true love for God.

 So firstly, Christian love is mission-oriented, seeking to bring others to God.

 Secondly, Christian love is demanding, the giving of everything we are over to God.

**3. Thirdly, Christian love is unconditional towards others**

In verse 39, Jesus goes on to say, “You shall love your neighbour…”

 Here, Jesus is moving away from Deuteronomy and reciting a commandment of God from Leviticus 19:18. Here we see that the command to love our neighbour isn’t just about loving those who share the same faith as us or who share our interests or who are similar to us.

 The command to love our neighbour means to love those who are antagonistic towards us, or who even hate us and that is, by far, the hardest thing to do. But such is the cost of love if we want to be followers of Jesus…

 Christian love is mission-oriented.

 Christian love is demanding.

 Christian love is unconditional towards others, friends and enemies alike.

**4. And finally, Christian love is self-accepting**

For many people, this is the hardest thing of all to hear: that God loves *you*.

 There was a wonderful Christian author a few years back called J.B Phillips and he was well respected and well loved. He wrote dozens of books on the spiritual life and was a prolific letter writer. Over the years, literally hundreds of people wrote to him with their problems and he unfailingly led them to God and the Scriptures and through his ministry many people received healing and the blessing of God in their lives.

 What was less well-known was that J.B. Phillips suffered from clinical depression his whole life and that illness brought him to the brink of suicide a number of times. His problems ran very deep but a major part of his depression was not feeling acceptable to God and so he hated himself.

 And perhaps that’s true of some of us too. We hate what we are, or maybe aspects of ourselves and we can’t believe that God can love us. But Jesus gently challenges this attitude when he says, “Love your neighbour *as you love yourself”*

He doesn’t say, “more than you love yourself” or “less than you love yourself” but “as you love yourself”.

 And if we can’t love ourselves, we will find it very difficult to love others.

 Now, I’m not suggesting that we go home tonight and blow kisses to ourselves in the mirror. But we must learn to love ourselves, to know that we are acceptable to God, and that God loves us just as we are, for who we are.

 Each one of us is beautiful and lovely and lovable.

 Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God…Love your neighbour as you love yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love is the very definition of the Christian faith. It is the heartbeat of what it means for us to follow Jesus. A love that is mission-oriented. A love that is demanding. A love that is inclusive of all people. A love that is self-accepting. We need to pray for ourselves and each other that we can grow in love and so reflect the ministry of Jesus in our own lives and through this church.