The Law of Love

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Pentecost + 22a – Matthew 22 34-46

A lawyer asked Jesus a question to *test* him. Over past weeks, we've seen a contest between Jesus and the religious leaders which began after he cleansed the Temple. This contest dragged on and the religious authorities were nervous. Roman military occupation threatened everything they held dear. Rome would not tolerate a *local* religion in its domain unless it fulfilled three criteria; it had to be historical, national and ethical for Rome to tolerate it. And here was Jesus publicly challenging the religious leaders' legitimacy. Rome was always watching. So for their own safety, the Temple authorities had to shut Jesus down.

Their fear of danger was well founded. Less that forty years later, their city and their Temple would be no more. In the year 66 CE Jewish zealots revolted against Roman Rule. Rome finally crushed the revolt in the year 70 CE. They besieged the city, killed most of its people, and eventually destroyed the city and its Temple. The people of the region were exiled or enslaved.

So by the time Matthew's Gospel was being composed, in exile from Judea, the surviving Jewish religious leaders – the Pharisees, also dispersed in the exile – were doing all they could to save Judaism from losing its identity completely. Without the Temple, they couldn't practise their sacrificial rites any more. So they preserved their faith in the form of worship common to Synagogues. They focussed on teaching people to keep the Jewish Law and observe annual festivals. It was a vital task was. If they hadn't done this, Judaism may well have disappeared.

But after the destruction of the Temple, Pharisaic Jews

weren't the only ones fighting for existence. Other Jews followed the Rabbi called Jesus. The Pharisees controlled the synagogues. Jesus' followers also gathered at the synagogues, and Rome was still in charge. Jesus' teachings challenged the way the Pharisees interpreted Jewish Law. So his followers couldn't be given free rein in a situation where, again, the appearance of disunity might spell doom for everyone.

Knowing this helps us understand the way Matthew's Gospel presents the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees over points of Law. The danger from Roman control was still real when Matthew's Gospel was being written down. Christians risked being thrown out of Synagogues. So you might expect Matthew's Gospel to portray Jewish Law simply as a tool being used for the maintenance of the Pharisees' power over the synagogues. But while Matthew is not keen on the Pharisees, the way this Gospel speaks about the Law is quite another matter. The way Jesus speaks to us through Matthew's Gospel offers us the Law as a gift, an affirming, empowering gift. Challenged by the lawyer, Jesus responds presenting the Law as *the* way to describe Love, to express Love, to live Love. Matthew's Jesus tells us that the Law is about the love we have for God and for our neighbour.

Let's pay attention to that: when Jesus is being challenged, he focusses on the essence of the Law, which he teaches is the love of God and love of neighbour. There are several places in Matthew's gospel where Jesus speaks about Law. But two of them together provide us with a key to how Matthew wants us to relate to Jewish Law. They're some of the best-known sayings in the New Testament.

One is the answer we just heard Jesus give to the lawyer's question about the greatest commandment. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself.* ***On these two commandments hang all the***

Law and the Prophets. (22:36-40) The other is where Jesus says: *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;* ***for this is the Law and the Prophets***. (7:12)

Jesus was in mortal danger in his time and he focussed on the essential things; love of God and neighbour. And as decades later, Matthew's community faced mortal danger, they focussed on those essentials too; love of God and neighbour. That's their message to us. In our time of existential crisis with the shadows of climate catastrophe and uncertainty about wars and shifts in the world political order – and the western church's time of questions about survival and relevance, Jesus and his apostle Matthew tell us to focus on the essentials: love God and love neighbour. Whatever threatens, we can't go wrong if we focus on love of God and neighbour.

Archbishop Geoff challenged us at synod to put aside our fears and differences and focus on our core business. And basing his argument on Matthew's Gospel, he put it simply. The Great Commandment is a pair with the Great Commission at the end of Matthew 28; make disciples of all nations. We love God and neighbour by *being* disciples and *making* disciples. We are the way the world is to learn of the love of God. We're not called to convert people – that's the work of the Holy Spirit. But we are all called to make the introductions. Our baptismal commission spells out how. *Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; give honour to all; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.* We are all ordained for this work by our baptism. So let's forget fear and work on the essentials; love God and neighbour; be disciples; make disciples. Amen.