

## The Vertical and Horizontal Axis of the Christian Faith

St. Peter's Henleaze

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2017

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

We fall into dangerous heresy when we think that we love God, whilst simultaneously hating our neighbour.

In our Gospel passage this morning, Jesus has something to say about just *that*. When asked which of God's commandment is the greatest, Jesus gives an answer that is an important word for all of us who call ourselves Christians. He responds by quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' There is ONE God who has revealed himself in history by calling a people to be *his* own, and prescribing a way of living for them to obey, the Torah. Live in *that* way, Jesus says, thus interpreting Deuteronomy 6:5 as 'the first and greatest commandment.'

I imagine his listeners at this point saying "okay, Love God, obey Torah...fair enough..." But Jesus isn't finished.

AND...he interrupts, the second is *so* similar, but also *seemingly* different that they must be held together. He then quotes Leviticus 19:18 'Love your neighbour as *yourself*' thus forcing his listeners to re-interpret the first commandment in light of the second. In other words, we can understand Jesus to have been teaching, that to love God is to observe *his* way of life, the Torah, which when you break it down, means treating others the way you would treat yourself. Jesus finishes by showing that God's entire Torah can be read through such a lens. Jesus' means of addressing the question posed to him, reveals a fatal flaw of a theology that understands the Christian faith in the spiritual, at the expense of the social.

For instance I remember reading about the Spanish Conquistadors and the approach they used to 'mission' in the Americas. They called it 'Tabula Rasa' or in English, 'a clean slate.' When they arrived on the American shores and encountered a people, they would offer them the opportunity to convert to Christianity and thus have their slate (meaning their moral transgressions) wiped clean. The native had this "choice": agree, and at best, be colonised. Refuse: and be butchered in the name of the Christian god. As I understand it, the conquistadors justified their brutality by seeing it as an act of grace. Killing the pagan, said their twisted logic, halted their sin, and thus stopped them depositing further divine wrath into their eternal bank account. You would have thought that they would have known that having died on a Roman cross, that Jesus stood unequivocally against such savagery.

But we need only look to Nazi Christianity in WW2, the Church's central role in human trafficking during the transatlantic slave trade, or even the messages of hate towards Gay people by groups like The Westboro Baptist Church, to see further examples of just how corrupt Christian religion becomes when it rejects Christ on *his* terms.

We can see from today's passage that how we relate to God vertically must ALWAYS be worked out in horizontal terms. John puts it succinctly in 1 John 4:20 when he writes "Those who say, "I love God," (vertical) and hate their brothers or sisters, (horizontal) are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have *seen*, cannot love God whom they have not seen.' Jesus prayed 'forgive us our sins (vertical) *as we forgive those who sin against us (horizontal).*' Still in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said that 'if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; (horizontal) then come and offer your gift (vertical).'

Every vertical or theological reality, whether it be divine forgiveness, love or reconciliation, has a horizontal, or ethical counterpart. As one theologian put it, if the question theology asks is "*who is God?*" then Ethics is right there next to Theology asking the question "*then what shall we do?*" We can see therefore, that when we have a distorted picture of Jesus, then our actions as Christians follow suite. Both theology and ethics must be held together. This is why in the Liturgy we have this amazing moment where the priest says "The Peace **of the Lord** be always with you (vertical)...let us offer one ANOTHER (horizontal) the sign of peace..." If we receive the peace of *The Lord*, the implication is that we must BE people, not of a self-interested, egoist and fragile peace, but of a gaping, generous, gracious peace, fitting of a God whose wholeheartedness receives us despite our wretched restlessness. The vertical must always precede and inform the horizontal, and so as the gospel reading attests, loving God is worked out in loving neighbour.

In our New Testament Reading, Paul seems to encapsulate this reality in how he recalled his relationship with the Thessalonians. He writes in verse 8: 'So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves...' Not only did we *announce* the uniqueness of God's love in Christ, but we also *demonstrated* it by embodying it! We see in all of these biblical passages the close relationship between the questions about God, and the questions about what we, as his people, should therefore do.

This seems to me, like a natural point to pause for reflection. Do we sometimes create an unbiblical divide between our relationship with God and with each other? As we meet weekly to celebrate the Eucharist together, do we sometimes rush to the altar without first examining ourselves to ensure we have not given our brother or sister reason to have something against us? Is there someone with whom you need to make peace, in order that you can offer them the peace of The Lord? And what about Jesus' command to treat others the way you would treat yourself? Could it be paraphrased to mean we should treat outsiders with the same love we treat insiders? To treat strangers or even enemies the same way we treat friends? Of course, right at the centre of the gospel we so freely receive, is God who treats us who were once his enemies as his friends. We can now let out a great sigh of relief knowing that the answers to all of these questions are found in Jesus, if only we are willing to be moved by his love in order that we can be possessed by it.

As we soon come to share this beautiful mystery of Christ's grace received through our communion with God and one another, may we find that we are ready and willing, to *be* those who administer that grace, as he has onto us, with reckless abandon, in his beloved world.

Amen.