

REFLECTION FOR THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

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1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8 & Matthew 22: 34-46

I wonder if you can possibly imagine what it's like to hear the same thing day after day after day? Perhaps you have some experience of turning on the news, for example, and it feeling like groundhog day - you're stuck in a moment that you can't get out of. Day in, day out, you're hearing much the same thing over and over again, as if on a loop. Eventually you reach saturation point. Anyone know what that feels like?

Of course you do. That's been the story of all of our lives for these past 7+ months, living as we have been, in the midst of this pandemic. And it's why, from time to time, we have to switch off and zone out if only for a while. It's not that we're burying our heads in the sand or being reckless - we've got the gist, we know what's happening and what we need to do and, by and large, we're doing it - we're doing our best to live according to all the guidance and rules. But, call it a self-preservation mechanism if you like, we know that we just can't listen endlessly to the same old thing - it's draining, it's soul destroying.

From the moment he'd entered Jerusalem and overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple, Jesus had also been hearing the same thing over and over again. For him, it was the voice of one religious leader or another ringing in his ears. He had his authority questioned by the chief priests and the elders. Then the pharisees and Sadducees tried to trick and trap him with questions about taxes and resurrection. Each time his response managed to silence his critics. But then, as we heard a few moments ago, the pharisees try again. This time it's a question about the law and, in particular, about which commandment is the greatest.

Jesus decides to answer this one simply and succinctly. The first and greatest commandment, he declares, is, 'You shall love God with your whole being, with all that you are.' The second, he adds, is the flipside of the same coin, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' He concludes by saying, 'Together, these two commandments underpin the whole of scripture'. As the pharisees huddle together to see what they can come back at him with, Jesus turns the tables on them - metaphorically speaking this time. He goes on the offensive, asking *them* a question about the relationship of the Messiah to King David.

We could spend all day talking about Jesus' question but, to my mind, what he's doing here is closing down the conversation. He's heard enough to know that his opponents aren't going to change their minds about him, their minds are closed. And, in any case, having expounded the whole of scripture in just a few short sentences, what more can he say or do, where else can he go?

Jesus knows that time is short and that the verbal jousting has to stop. It isn't getting anyone anywhere. He knows that he needs to focus his attention on those people whose lives he can change and transform, so he throws out a question to his opponents to end the talking. It's not quite sticking his fingers in his ears going 'La, la, la, not listening anymore' but it's

equally effective for, as Matthew tells it, 'No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.'

Closing down the conversation is, in part, I believe, an act of self-preservation for Jesus. He's reached saturation point and needs to zone out. But he does so precisely because he still has important work to complete in the world, he wants to make a difference to the lives of others, and he needs to concentrate on that.

And maybe that's what we should do too.

I appreciate that it's not quite the same but if listening to the news at the moment is sending us into a downward spiral, if all the talk of rising infection rates and increased restrictions is getting us down, if we find all the doom and gloom of the news deadening, perhaps we need to find a way to zone out in order that we can continue to find life for ourselves and then offer it to others.

This isn't a case of total avoidance - we have a pretty good idea what's going on around us and are doing our best to keep other people safe. Rather it's an acknowledgement that there are some things in life that we can't change however much we might want to be able to. So, if our preoccupation with near wall-to-wall coverage of all things Covid-19 is getting in the way of loving God with all that we are, loving others as we love ourselves, or even managing to love ourselves, something is wrong. It's not for no reason that Jesus names the commandment to love the greatest. And, as Paul makes clear, when writing to the church in Thessalonica, being gentle is an appropriate way of sharing the gospel with others. If we're to love others as we love ourselves then being gentle to ourselves could well be a necessary starting point.

Just as Jesus fires off a question that he doesn't really want an answer to, in a sense it doesn't matter how we break the cycle that has been dragging us down. What the little steps towards being gentle to ourselves will look like will, of course, be different to each of us. We could go for a walk; sit at a window and watch the birds; read a good book; put on a film; watch *Strictly*; tune in to a football match or listen to some music (and Bruce Springsteen's new album would, of course, be an excellent place to go). Whatever we each choose to do we need to find ways to be gentle to ourselves. But then, of course, we need to reach out in gentleness to others. All over the country there was such a great sense of solidarity and camaraderie and neighbourliness in the early months of this pandemic. Remember all the shopping for others that was taking place everywhere we looked and the banging of pots and pans and clapping on Thursday evenings for our NHS and frontline workers? Weariness has seen some of that sense of togetherness wear off. We're increasingly seeing signs of frustration and anger in people. The world needs a bit of gentleness once again.

There are times in life when we've heard enough, when all the talking in the world isn't going to change anything. In today's reading, Jesus shows us, I think, that it's precisely at this point that love needs to be embodied, however costly that might ultimately prove to be.

The question for all of us today then becomes, 'How might we best know, and embody, the love of God - and reflect it gently to others - when opportunities to share physical space are so very limited?'

