

ST. AIDAN'S AND WESLEY UNITING CHURCHES, CANBERRA**SERMON****4 NOVEMBER 2012****James Haire****Text: Mark 12: 28 – 34; The Greatest Commandment**

In early 2003 Alistair Christie, as Moderator of the Synod of NSW and the ACT, and I, As President, were here in Canberra to offer pastoral support for those caught up in the Canberra bush fires.

If your house was on fire, what would you grab as you escaped? Your children, of course, if they could walk for themselves. Your old people. Your purse and your wallet. Your computer, maybe or maybe not! Your passport and personal documents. Your photographs. In the 2003 Canberra bushfires, cars were mainly packed with photo albums. Your wrist watch your father gave you. The ring your grandmother gave you. Stacks of letters from your beloved.

You take with you your identity and your history.

You look on from a safe distance as everything else is burnt to ashes. You realise the significance of what you have done. These things, the symbols of your identity and your history, are more valuable to you than tables and chairs, china and glass, clothes, books, plasma TV sets and all the things that have found a place in your home. You have discovered where your priorities really lie. You have discovered your identity.

In this section, Mark 12: 28 – 34, Jesus deals with **identity**. History for the people of Israel, in their travels, identity was central.

Jesus engages in conversation with the scribe. The conversation, unlike the other controversial discourses, is friendly. There seems to be a genuine searching for truth. The scribe seems to be asking for the key to Judaism. That is, a kind of Jewish confession of faith.

This certainly is so in that the reply given by Jesus is a combination of the *Shema* (Confession of Faith) Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and Leviticus 19:18

Deuteronomy 6:4 – 5 reads: ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’.

And Leviticus 19:18 reads: ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.’

In Mark 12 it is condensed as: ‘The first is, ‘Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

We know that this was used in Judaism from the Second Century BC as morning prayer, and it is still used today as morning and evening prayer.

The scribe is looking for the keynote or measure by which he can interpret the entire plethora of the commandments. That is, the 248 positive commandments and the 365 prohibitions, which make up the 613 commandments.

This is to be the guide and thus the confession of faith.

Jesus here does two significant things:

1. He shows himself to stand in the tradition of Judaism

He fulfils the law. This is very important for Christianity.

Christianity is not a religion in the sense that someone invented it.

It is God’s Will for the world.

Here Jesus sees himself as continuing that Will from the beginning of creation.

2. He relates the treatment of the neighbour to the very heart of the Gospel

He brings it into the *Shema* (Confession of Faith).

Other religions have gods. The Jews had divine laws.

They learned them by daily worship.

It should also be noted that Rabbi Hillel (40BC to 10AD) says that ‘what you yourself hate do not do to your neighbour’ (*b.Sabb.31A*).

Today is close to All Saints’ Day. Each year this is a poignant time for me. For on this day I especially remember the six theological students whom I taught in Indonesia who gave their lives in the inter-communal violence in Indonesia in 1999 and 2000. Some were beheaded in public, others in their churches. I taught all six over six or seven years; I took part in their ordinations; I laid my hand on their heads. Three were converts to Christianity; all died in their thirties and forties. Here are the members of the *Sanctorum Communio*, the communion of saints. We are part of that group, the living and those living in God’s nearer presence. These words which Jesus gives us in Mark 12: 28 – 34 are our very identity too.

There are four points we can draw out of this passage:

1. The scribe remains a scribe.
 Unlike Bartimaeus, who is the disciple par excellence, the scribe does not follow Jesus.
 Intellectual assent is not enough.
 He is close to the kingdom of God
 But he is not a follower. Discipleship is both a matter of the mind or intellect and the heart or existence.
2. Existential love of God is primary for a follower of Jesus.
 Your whole orientation needs to be towards the worship and daily service of God.
3. Love of neighbour is the Christian expression of your love of God.
 However, humanism of itself is not sufficient.

4. We need to examine the nature of *agapē*.

As opposed to *eros* (sexual love) and *philia* (friendship or mateship), here we have *agapē* (Christian love)

Agapē is best seen as the reflection of Jesus does for us on the cross.

This is seen, for example, in I Corinthians 13, where *agapē* can mean **both** God's love for us in Christ **and** our response to that love of God.

It is total self-giving and total re-orientation. Therefore, first of all it is our re-orientation to God, because God has first loved us. It is our responsive love to God. The image of marriage is a metaphor – Christ loves the church.

That attitude is applied to the neighbour.

So you have concern for the neighbour which is out of all proportion to your relationship to the neighbour.

Festo Kivengere was the Archbishop of Uganda during the terrible days of Idi Amin. Idi Amin was one of the most savage tyrants in recent history, who claimed to be 'Lord of all the beasts of the earth and fishes of the sea'.

During his brutal reign from 1971-1979, he orchestrated the torture and execution of 100s of 1000s of people, many of whom belonged to the Anglican Church that Bishop Kivengere led.

Before Idi Amin was driven from power, Bishop Kivengere was asked what he would do if he found himself with a loaded gun in the presence of Idi Amin. The bishop replied: 'I would hand the gun to the president and say: "I think this is your weapon. I think that it may belong to you. It is not mine. It is of no use to me. My weapon is love, *agapē*. It was also the only weapon of my Master, Jesus Christ.'

James Haire