

Loving Father, as we are challenged by the words of scripture may your Spirit enable us to see Jesus. Amen.

- Love. Such a small word. Such a plethora of meanings. So overused. So little understood!
- Think for a second. How do you understand the word 'love', in everyday use? And do you think this is what Jesus meant when he used the word? ... Whichever. There seems to be a singular lack of love at play in our Gospel reading today. Rather more suspicion and intrigue!
- Jesus has just finished a bit of argy-bargy with the Sadducees who were trying to make him look stupid. That's where we begin. *'When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together'*. There's nothing like siding with the enemy! The Pharisees and Sadducees were not mutual fans. They disagreed. It would have been like the Green Party working with the presenters of Top Gear, in order to make a point.
- So *'one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him'*. Do you note the element of competition in that short phrase? We Pharisees will see off this upstart from Galilee better than you Sadducees!
 - Not a very auspicious beginning when we're talking about love!
- *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"* Maybe that doesn't seem such a hard question. It relates to the Jewish commandment in Deuteronomy which Jews recited daily. *'He said to him, "'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.* He then explains what he means by love by adding another Jewish law from Leviticus. *And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."* *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* In other words, love isn't a feeling. It is practical.
- But none of that seems particularly surprising. Maybe the Pharisees were going to follow it up with a second harder question, but Jesus gets in first and asks them one. *"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?"*
- SLIDE Again they give the stock reply. *"The son of David."*, which allow Jesus to deliver his killer punchline, *"How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'"? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"*
- In case you've got a little lost at this point, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 110, a psalm of David. God, the Lord, is instructing his Messiah, to sit at his right hand. The writer of the Psalm, David, is calling the Messiah, lord. You would not call your son, lord. So how can the Messiah be *'the Son of David'*? END SLIDE
 - And Jesus silenced the adversary. *'No one was able to give him an answer'*
- It's playing with words. And it doesn't sound a very loving game. But maybe there's more to it than that?
- As those who have been coming to the Old Testament group know, David was a very flawed, all too sinful man who caused enormous problems for himself and his family, not to mention his country, by his outrageously selfish, conniving, impulsive and frankly sometimes cowardly, actions. He was also Israel's greatest king, uniting the kingdom, establishing the capital Jerusalem, vanquishing his enemies. There's a sense in which he symbolizes the triumphs and all too obvious failures of humanity. There's a sense in which he symbolizes you and me.
- And Jesus, the Messiah, God's anointed one, the Son of God, is his direct descendant, his son. He has come close. You can't get much closer than that.
- God has come to share with us, to save us because he loves us. That's the hidden message.
- Right in the middle of a passage that is bristling with aggression and frustration we have love. God's love. Jesus's love. Only those who read the bible in terms of Jesus can begin to understand what this love is all about.
- And that's the power of the bible. There's no point reading it as an instruction booklet. It's full of people making foolish decisions. There's no point reading it as a moral guide. It's full of violence and it's easy to interpret it to suit your own ends. A verse out of context here. A passage that appears to support racism there. There's no point reading it as a self-help manual. You'd just get confused at its contradictions.
- The power of the bible is about relationship. The relationship between God and his humanity, his beloved creation. And the relationships between human beings and each other and the creation that God has provided for them. And those relationships are complex. And we get muddled and implicated in the mess of the world.

- The bible is a place to come and ask those uncomfortable questions about relationships. The relationship between God and us. Why does he let such terrible things happen if he loves us so much? The relationships between us and our neighbour. What can we do about the bad feeling that exists between us? And the relationship between us and creation. How can we live in balance with the rest of creation?
 - And the central answer is love. God's love. God's love brought to us through Jesus. His suffering and death on the cross. That's love. His glorious resurrection opening the possibility of the Kingdom of God for all humanity, let alone all creation. That's love.
- That first understanding of biblical truths is crucial. In order to grasp it, to enter into it, to enjoy it, it's fundamental to accept Christ as Lord, so we can see him behind the words of scripture as we read the bible.
- There are two other answers to the question of who Jesus, the Messiah is, in St Matthew's Gospel.
- Peter is clear, when inspired by the Spirit, he says, in chapter 16, *'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God'*.
- The Pharisees are just as clear when they say in chapter 12, *'It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out demons.'*
 - So which of these two do you side with? Is Jesus your Saviour, the Son of the living God? And how would anyone know? How would they see your love, God's love in action in your life?
- How do you understand the word 'love'? Jesus, using the well-worn words of scripture, informs us that to love in the way that we are talking about love, you really have to love God first ... with your whole life! That's easy then! But that's ok, because he knows we'll fail, before we even begin. And he's come close to hold our hand and lead us, despite our weakness. After all he did it for King David, who was quite a sinner.
- And he gives us a prompt by talking about love in action and loving our neighbour. The best way of demonstrating your love for God. Loving your neighbour as yourself.
 - Can you love your neighbour if you don't love yourself? I don't think so. Love turns to duty. And that's only a short step from resentment and suddenly love has disappeared out the window.
- There is so much today about loving ourselves. We are encouraged to spoil ourselves. Give ourselves a break. Go easy on ourselves. We are urged by society, by advertising, by the popular press, by Facebook, by just about every agency known to us except Christianity, to think of ourselves as good people. The problem is that means we can't afford to fail, and fall from grace because that shows to the world that we are not good people. Therefore we have to hide our real selves behind a veneer of perfection. We can't really love ourselves because we know only too well that we are not perfect, or anywhere near, whereas everyone else is, or seems to be. And when someone else does fail to succeed there are calls for resignations and exposure. So we are frightened of being discovered.
- Because we don't love ourselves, we can't really love our neighbour. Indeed like the Pharisees we are suspicious of them and try to catch them out. We rightly suspect them of not being as perfect as they seem.
- But Jesus loves us. Therefore we must be lovable.
- What does all this mean in practice? How do we love in this way? How do we allow our love, God's love to increase in this fallen world? Perhaps 'increase' is the wrong word? Perhaps flourish would be better? It's quite easy to do an act of love. It's quite hard to continue loving when you are rebuffed.
- St Paul gave an example of this to do it in our relationship with the Thessalonians in our first reading. Keeping Jesus central and plodding on, trying to do the right thing.
- And Jesus in his relationships with the world, wasn't afraid to get into arguments and indeed to play his adversaries at their own game. He spoke the truth. He protected his relationship with God, his Father and he demonstrated by his life and obedience, his self-esteem and loyalty to his ragbag group of disciples, his life, his death and his resurrection that he was not only loving his Father, but also himself, and his neighbour.
- Our challenge, knowing that we will fail, and accepting that we will fail, and realizing that Jesus is there to pick us up when we fail, ... our challenge is to do the same.
- So this week, notice, how you are loving God. And notice how you are loving or not loving your neighbour!
- And use scripture to bolster yourself up and let your love flourish! Amen.