

Guided by love

Last Sunday after Trinity (CW, Year A, Proper 25) - 29.10.2023

Lev 19.1-2,15-18 | Ps 1 | 1 Thess 2.1-8 | Mt 22.34-end

Reading

"**34** When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' **37** 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.'" **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' **41** Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: **42** 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' **43** He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, **44** "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? **45** If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' **46** No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."¹

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

1 Mt 22.34-end, NRSVA

Sermon

I. Charity, Faith and interpretation

Dear friends!² - What does it mean to love God and your neighbour? To answer that question let me tell a joke that sheds light on charity.

Everyday a woman stood on her porch and shouted, "Praise the Lord!" And every day the atheist next door yelled back, "There's no Lord!" One day, she prayed "Lord, I'm hungry. Please send me some groceries." The next morning she found a big bag of food on her stairs. "Praise the Lord," she shouted. "I told you there was no Lord," the neighbour said, "I bought those groceries." "Praise the Lord," said the woman. "He not only sent me groceries he made the devil pay for them as well."³

Jokes often get to the heart of important aspects of a question. In the case of this joke, topics such as concrete help for fellow human beings and the question of belief and disbelief are touched on. At the same time, the joke leaves the door open on the question of the correct perspective in relation to faith. There is room for interpretation.

II. Reading the Bible is interpretation

The need for interpretation also applies to the texts of the Bible. Jesus himself provides us with a specific interpretation of the biblical texts. Let me explain this a little!

Some 30 years ago I took out a subscription with a journal belonging to the German Catholic Bible Society called "Bibel und Kirche" (Bible and Church). The topic of one issue was "Judaism and Christianity". One of the pages showed a lithograph that made a lasting impression on me, which has influenced me. As I remember it, the image showed Jesus, dressed in a Jewish prayer shawl, holding a Torah scroll open in his two hands. On the scroll one could read two passages from the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

² "Ἀγαπητοί, εἰ οὕτως ὁ θεὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς, καὶ ἡμεῖς ὀφείλομεν ἀλλήλους ἀγαπᾶν" (NIV: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."); MSG: " My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other."; GNB: "Dear friends, if this is how God loved us, then we should love one another."; KJV: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."; NRSV: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.") 1 John 4.11

³ Cf. <https://newbloggycat.com/2013/06/11/joke-of-the-day-love-thy-neighbour/>

The first passage was from the Book of Deuteronomy: (In Hebrew: Shema Yisrael ...) "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."⁴ The second passage was from the Book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."⁴

The title of the picture, if I remember correctly, was "Jesus interpreting the Torah." The message of the picture was unmistakable. Jesus is to be understood amongst other things as a Torah-observant Jew. He was surely familiar with the practices of the religion of his people at his time.⁶ Accordingly, he studied and interpreted the sacred writings of his people. (The Gospel of Luke, for example, has a story about the 12-year-old Jesus discussing with the scribes in the temple.⁶)

The texts of the Torah were already several centuries old at the time of Jesus.⁸ It was therefore necessary to continually discover the concrete relevance of the texts for the present.

The texts of the Bible are not unlike other ancient Near Eastern texts. There are often different and sometimes divergent versions of a story. For example, there are two creation stories and two versions of the Ten Commandments. And the four gospels also stand in this ancient oriental tradition.⁹ The Bible is a library with many different books. It contains legal texts, history, poetry, philosophy, music, personal correspondence and prophecies.¹⁰ In their diversity, the biblical texts tell an amazing story of God, humankind and creation. Jesus, in his reading of the Bible, joined an already long tradition of explanation and discussion of Israel's holy scriptures.

As Christians, we are part of this tradition of interpreting the biblical writings. And we have a special perspective from which we look at the biblical texts. We interpret these in terms of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christians Jesus is central for us. It is our aim to follow the interpretation and example of Jesus the Jew whom we confess to be the

4 Deut 6.4-5, NRSVA

4 Deut 19.18, NRSVA

6 Cf. Reck, Norbert: Anders als wir dachten. Was das Judesein Jesu für den christlichen Glauben bedeuten kann. In: Bibel und Kirche, 4, 2022. P 224-231.

6 Cf. Lk 2.41-52

8 Cf. <https://www.die-bibel.de/bibeln/wissen-zur-bibel/die-entstehung-der-bibel/der-kanon/>

9 Cf. Reck, Norbert: Anders als wir dachten.

10 Cf. Geoghegan, Jeffrey/Homan, Michael (2003): The Bible For Dummies. Wiley.

Messiah, the Son of the living God. And we long to be formed into the likeness of Christ. With this perspective in mind, let us return to the Gospel according to Matthew.

III. Jesus's interpretation of the Torah

A majority of scholars believes that the Gospel of Matthew was written after 80 AD, or possibly around the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹¹ Therefore the Gospel reflects the situation of a Christian community that is still very much connected to the context of the Jewish community at that time.

Accordingly, Matthew's gospel was probably designed to be read and reflected on alongside the Torah readings of the synagogue and alongside the great festivals of the Jewish festive calendar¹² Matthew deliberately tells the story of Jesus against the background of Israel's holy scriptures. Like the Torah Matthew's Gospel has 5 main parts. Every part ends with almost the same words, like: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things ..." ¹³ Matthew portrays Jesus as the teacher, renewer and fulfiller of the Torah. It is Jesus who fulfils the Torah, appearing as a new Moses. The five main parts of Matthew's gospel are framed by the introduction, the prehistory and birth story of Jesus on the one hand and concluding with the passion narrative and the resurrection appearances on the other.

Today's gospel is from the last of the 5 main parts of the Gospel of Matthew. It addresses a number of ethical questions¹⁴ with teachings about the end of time and the Day of the Judgement¹⁵ Let's briefly try and read the Gospel of Matthew alongside the Torah.

Just as the fifth book of the Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy, contains the legacy of Moses, the fifth part of the Gospel of Matthew can be understood as the final instructions of Jesus.

11 Cf. <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/ressourcen/bibelkunde/bibelkunde-nt/matthaeusevangelium-mt>; cf. <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/matthew/0>

12 Cf. Spong, John Shelby (2016): *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy*. Harper Collins.

13 Cf. Mt 7.28 | Mt 11.1 | Mt 13.53 | Mt 19.1 | Mt 26.3

14 Cf. Mt 19-23

15 Cf. Mt 24-25

Scholars call it ***The Journey Section***, because it is the last segment of Jesus's journey to the cross.¹⁶ The question concerning the most important commandment coming at this stage of Jesus' ministry is of great significance. The love of God and neighbour becomes the key through which the purpose of the Torah is affirmed by Jesus.

Colby Martin, an US-American best-selling author and pastor, sums it up with the following words: "The Law was designed to move people toward love of God, self, and neighbour. Therefore, any attempt to understand the laws today [...] must be done within the context of moving people toward love."¹⁶

IV. Guided by love

With regard to the law, Jesus and his exemplary life are central to us. Through Jesus, his example and his teachings we can understand what it means to love God and our fellow human beings. That brings us back to our initial question: What does it mean to love God and our neighbour?

To answer this question we should look deeper into the final instructions of Jesus. Looking at the end of the Journey Section in chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel we find the ***The Parable of the Judgement of the Nations***. On the last day the righteous will ask the Son of Man: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."¹⁷

What counts on judgment day is not pious behaviour, participation in religious celebrations or personal beliefs, although all these are to enable us and continually remind us to recognize the presence of God in the hungry, poor, strangers, sick and prisoners.¹⁹ Rather, it's about how we respond to the needs of those around us. And many people experience also that the love for those around us increases as our love for God grows deeper.

16 Cf. Spong, John Shelby (2016): *Biblical Literalism*.

16 Martin, Colby (2022): *UnClobber: Expanded Edition with Study Guide: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. John Knox Press.

17 Mt 25.37-40, NRSVA

19 Cf. Spong, John Shelby (2016): *Biblical Literalism*.

What concrete charity looks like will be different for each one of us, depending on our skills, our talents, our time and our resources. Charity is not only an individual duty, it is also the duty of each and every church community. It is always a central part of the church's mission with no ifs or buts.

V. Be united by the care for *the needy and outcasts*

Are you aware that serving God through service to others is part of our Mission Statement here at Christ Church? As a congregation we have committed ourselves to meet and share with those in need, and donate ten per cent of our income to charity. And also the Service of Healing and Laying on of Hands which we celebrate (today and) from time to time is a visible sign of God' grace in a church that takes care for those who need healing and support.

Prayers for each other, concrete charity and our donations already unite us in a common purpose as a local church community. And as Christians it should unite us in all our different church contexts, even beyond our differences in faith.

Finally! Recall the joke at the beginning of the sermon. Which of the two people served God the most and who showed the greatest love, the compassionate atheist or the woman who praises God?

Let us pray! - Merciful God, help us to be attentive to you and to recognize you in this world. Show us your face. Help us to love you and to serve you in the poor, strangers and marginalized with our skills and talents. For whatever we do for one of the least of our brothers and sisters, we do it to you. **Amen.**

Summary: *Reading scripture is interpretation. As Christians, we base our interpretation of the Bible on the example of the Jew Jesus whom we confess as the Messiah. As Christians our guiding light is Jesus' example of self giving love. That love should lead our actions and summarises our duties concerning God and our neighbours. First and foremost through our care for the needy and outcasts we serve and love God and our neighbours.*

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