

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 71”
Matthew 22:34-40

As we move on to the next section of Matthew’s story of Jesus’ life and teaching, we need to remember that this is all happening in the last week of Jesus’ life – or, at least, the last week before his execution on the cross. He’s still in the Temple courts, teaching and preaching to the crowds which are gathering for the Passover Festival. We’ve seen him causing disruption amongst the traders and money-changers in the outer courtyard and heard him as he’s responded to the authorities’ questioning of his motives by telling three stories about the Kingdom of God. And in this little section which we’ve just read, Jesus faces the last of three testing questions from the leaders of the people – last week it was the Sadducees and this week it’s back to the good old Pharisees. Jesus has sent the Sadducees with a flea in their collective ear, so the Pharisees get into a bit of a huddle and send another of their members along with a question for Jesus, once more trying to “test” him (v35). Jesus has been talking about this Kingdom of God and they’re keen to discover if it will have any link to the Law which they’ve been trying to promote.

Jesus has already been demonstrating by his own actions what this Kingdom might be like. He has healed people – those who had faith themselves and those who relied on the faith of others. He has confronted the forces of evil as he has cast out demons and transformed lives. He has provided food for the hungry and brought peace on storm-tossed lakes. He has spoken from the heart in stories and in debates. He has allowed his closest friends a glimpse of his divine glory to reassure them that he really is who he claims to be – the Kingly Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. He has gathered around him a group of followers whom he has been mentoring and motivating in order to continue his mission when eventually he has to return to his Father in heaven. And he has left them in no doubt that the success of this new agenda depends on a readiness to suffer and, in his case, to die for the cause.

It was the kind of iconoclastic, revolutionary, radical, mind-boggling message that prompted dramatically polarised responses. Some loved it and followed Jesus wherever he went, eager for more signs of the Kingdom, eager for more words of wisdom. Some hated it and followed Jesus wherever he went, hassling him and setting traps they hoped he would fall into – traps designed to expose his religious, theological and political unacceptability. But Jesus didn’t fall into them. We’ve seen him field questions from the Chief Priests, the Pharisees, the Sadducees – all of whom realised that they were likely to lose their hold on power and status and wealth if what Jesus said really did gain a popular following. And, as I’ve said, in the last couple of weeks we have looked at some of the questions that were posed by these groups and the ways in which Jesus quickly disposed of them.

But the tone of this third question is different, as is the tone of Jesus’ reply. You get the impression that this was really a genuine question, that the man really did want to know Jesus’ opinion. After all, Jesus

has talked in parables. He has demonstrated in practice much of what lay behind his message. He has called people to costly commitment, inviting them to “*take up their cross*” and follow him. But what is at the heart of Jesus’ message? What does he really want people to do? Where does he stand on the really important matters of faith? The expert in the law obviously has a keen interest in Jesus’ answer to this questions – “*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*”

Now this is not just an idly speculative question. Although it’s a test question, I don’t think it’s particularly designed to lead Jesus into a trap. It’s the kind of question that often occupied the Rabbis and other scholars as they grappled with the Law of Moses. There are actually 613 statutes in the Law – 365 positive ones and 248 negative ones – as well as the plethora of other interpretative commentaries that had grown up around them (and continue to this day). Much time was spent differentiating between the “greater” and “lesser” laws – a bit like the Roman Catholic differentiation between venial and mortal sins. And a great deal of effort went into formulating the one great principle which governed all the Law: what was the most important commandment, which really governed all the others?

Anyway, Jesus once again cleverly emphasises the continuity of his mission with that of the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, by responding with two commandments taken directly from the Law of Moses – *Deuteronomy 6:4,5* and *Leviticus 19:18*. The first of those was known as the *Shema*, the Hebrew word for “*Hear*”. It was something that Jewish people would recite as part of their prayers twice a day. And here Jesus puts it at the very centre of his thinking, making it the foundation of his message and mission. If you want to know what’s really important as one of God’s people, as a follower of Jesus the Christ, then here it is – “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” In other words, give yourself over totally to God and his ways.

For those who choose to follow the way of Jesus, who are really serious about the Kingdom of God, there is no option but to be completely given over to him – and if you are, then the second commandment about loving your neighbour starts to fall into place rather more easily. We talk an awful lot about loving our neighbour, about ways in which we should be operating as individual Christians and as a church in demonstrating love and care to those around us, but when we fall down on that particular aspect of our Christian lives, maybe it’s because we haven’t quite got the first and most important commandment as fully in focus as we should, so that’s where we’re going to concentrate this morning.

Jesus is clearly stressing here that those who claim to follow him need to give every part of themselves over to loving God. The word for love that he chooses to use here is the Greek word *αγαπη* (*agape*), which is the word used for unconditional, sacrificial love. And he says that the whole of our heart, soul and mind has to be included in that act of self-sacrifice and devotion. It is the totality of your being that is

to be given over to God – all that you are and all that you have. To press that point home, Jesus uses this Old Testament quotation, but changes it slightly. In *Deuteronomy 6:5* we read that it is our “*heart ... soul ... and strength*” that we are concerned with. Jesus changes “*strength*” to “*mind*” for some reason. Or rather, that’s what Matthew chooses to include in his record of this exchange. If you read Mark’s version he includes all four words. So this morning let’s consider what all four might have to say to us today.

1. YOUR WHOLE HEART

This is, if you like, the emotional core of your being. Rick Warren writes that “*The Bible uses the term **heart** to describe the bundle of desires, hopes, interests, ambitions, dreams and affections you have. Your heart represents the source of all your motivations – what you love to do and what you care about most.*” We might say that it is your **passion**, the very core of your being which gets really excited about the goals and the focus of your life. We use phrases like “I love you with all my heart” when we are trying to express our devotion to a loved one.

OK, then – could you honestly say that your whole passion is to love God? Is he at the forefront of your thoughts more often than not? Do you stop to consider what the effect of your actions, your thoughts, your words will have on your relationship with God? Or are there other things that are the real passion in your life? Maybe it’s your partner. Maybe it’s your job. Maybe it’s your ambition. Maybe it’s your hobbies. Ask yourself what it is that really gets you going, what really fires you up, what gives you the motivation to go out each day and do what you have to do. And if it’s not God, then there’s something amiss.

Now that is strong stuff, isn’t it? Because this is the first and greatest commandment according to the Jesus whom you claim to be following. If it’s not God who is the focus and goal of all that you do, then you are not keeping to the very first part of this fundamental commandment. If you get more worked up about your pension scheme than you do about God, then you’re not doing what it says here. If you are moved to tears more readily by the death of a lion on a game reserve in Africa than by your passion for God, then you’re not doing what it says here. If you are more concerned about England’s performance at soccer, rugby, cricket or tennis than you are about your walk with God, then you’re not doing what it says here. If you spend more time faffing about on Facebook and connecting with all your so-called friends than you do trying to keep your relationship with God in good repair, then you’re not doing what it says here. Where is your heart, your passion focussed?

2. YOUR WHOLE SOUL

Your soul is the essence of your being, the spiritual core of your life. It's the part of your life that relates to all that is beyond your immediate ability to experience with your senses. You might want to call it the "religious" bit or the "spiritual" bit. This is what you use in prayer and in worship. This is where you sense the presence of the spiritual world, that which is beyond this world and this life. And make no mistake, there is stuff that is beyond the actual here and now. I'm not just talking about those feelings you have when you see a radiant sunset or hear a stunning piece of music or read a powerful poem or join with others in singing a moving song. That's all part of it, but there's a lot more to it as well: the spiritual world of what the Bible calls "*principalities and powers*" – angels, demons, forces of evil and the power of God.

Is that part of your being which God has created in his own image to experience the spiritual really tuned in to him? Are there things in your life which maybe mean you're attracted to other gods, other powers? Do you put more trust in your horoscope than in the word of God? Do you have your own little superstitions, which may appear completely harmless at first, but gradually suck you into a dependence on them that is totally at odds with your need to devote your whole soul to God? You need to ensure that your life is filled with the Holy Spirit of God, that there is no corner of your life where other spiritual forces could possibly gain a foothold. If you haven't, then you're clearly out of step with this commandment. And don't forget, Jesus isn't talking here about the greatest *suggestion* or the greatest bit of *advice*, but the "*greatest commandment*".

3. YOUR WHOLE MIND

As I've said, Jesus has added this word to the other three that appeared in *Deuteronomy* where the quotation came from. It may well be that it is there to make clear to the Greeks and other intellectually anxious people that you cannot argue your way out of this or come up with schemes that let you off the hook, spiritually speaking. God made you in his image with the ability to think, to choose, to make decisions – decisions which have consequences. He is not interested in automatons who blindly and unthinkingly do what he tells them. He has given you the capacity to make choices, to think carefully about this world and about the way in which you function within it.

And to help with that process we have the Bible, God's word. It's there to be read, reflected upon and acted upon. We have centuries of accumulated knowledge about God and about his ways. We have opportunities to discuss and share our thoughts on God's word and his world. We have the capacity to apply what we read and hear to our everyday lives. When you come into church, you're not expected to leave your brains at the door and absorb uncritically everything you hear in this place. Nor are you expected to come in here, listen to what's going on and then leave it all here while you go and live your life out there as if nothing had happened in here. What you read and hear of God's word should be growing, accumulating inside you, enabling you to grow and mature as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I reckon that if we really did have that passion for God which is implied by the first of these words here we'd be pretty passionate to find out more about him and his ways day by day. Can you really say that you love God with your whole mind, or is it filled with sales figures, performance targets, sports results, music charts, television schedules and the like. They have their place in your mind, but so does God – and he has first call on it.

4. YOUR WHOLE STRENGTH

That can all seem very airy-fairy, can't it? It's easy to talk about passion, spirit, intellect and know that no-one can really tell what's going on in there. No-one can truly read your thoughts or discern the focus of your passion or the state of your soul. So Moses talks of loving God with "*your whole strength*", as does Jesus in Mark's version of this – loving God with your physical being as well. Of course, the attitudes you harbour will eventually issue forth in words and actions, but here Jesus is talking about consciously submitting your body and your actions to the will of God. The wedding ceremony can contain the promise made by one partner to the other, "*With my body I thee worship*" – I devote myself to you physically, becoming one flesh.

Well, says Jesus, love God with your body too. And this isn't some daft plea to lift your hands in the air when you sing choruses or dance about to Christian music. This is about recognising that, as Paul says to the Corinthians, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He has graciously allowed you to share that with one other person, if you're married to them, but he's not about to let you do whatever you want with it, if you really do claim to love him. Your physical actions are a means of expressing your worship to God, of expressing your devotion to him. And those actions are to be in tune with his will and the things he tells you in his word.

Use your strength, your actions to demonstrate just how much you love God. It will certainly involve loving your neighbour, showing by the way you live your life that you love God and that you have your neighbour's good at heart too. It will involve taking care of your body as an act of gratitude to God for his care of you – not that we are to get carried along by whatever is currently fashionable in terms of cosmetics or gymnastics: it might mean walking a bit more and eating the right stuff so you don't need to waste your money on all the other things. If all your time is spent trying to get your body to the shape some magazine has told you it should be, or you are completely consumed with a passion for looking like some transient minor celebrity, then you're not concentrating on God and what he might be trying to say to you.

You see, Jesus is saying here that the most important thing for anyone who wants to follow him is to be totally submitted to God. He – and he alone – must have first place in absolutely every area of our lives. Our passion should be to live as he wants us to. Our focus should be on what he is saying to us. Our desire should be to do his will and to serve him in every way. And how is that demonstrated? By living day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute with him in mind; by loving our neighbours – the good and the bad, the quiet and the noisy, the lovely and the unlovely – as we'd like to be loved ourselves. But of course, we know all that, don't we?

And there's the shock in all this. The expert in the law asks Jesus what would be his greatest commandment, possibly hoping for some new insight into it all. But Jesus says that the greatest commandment is something that you and your fellow Jewish people say twice a day. "Twice a day you remind yourself that God should be at the very centre of your whole lives. Twice a day you declare that you want to worship the One True God. You don't need me to tell you what the greatest commandment is: you just need to get on and do it!" In many ways, if the people of Israel had kept to the commandments faithfully throughout their history, if they had loved the Lord their God with all their being and reached out to the nations around them as God intended, then Jesus might not have needed to come. He is, in a sense, just telling them what they already know.

And so do we. We know all this, don't we? We know that God should be the focus of all that we are and all that we do and all that we have. We know – we've heard it from this pulpit and others, we've read it in the Bible and other books, we've heard God's Spirit telling us and we've probably pledged ourselves to do it time and time again – we know that our driving passion should be for God and for him alone. But we need to hear it again. We need to reflect upon it again. We need to do something about it again. We talk about this church being "*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church*". Well, if that's to be true, we all need to be serious about it. And if we really do get serious about it, then the ministry of this church and the ministry of the people who are a part of it will know no bounds.

Let's ask the question again. Where is God on your list of priorities? How closely does your agenda match his? Do you truly "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*"? What are you going to do about it? You cannot sit on the fence or try to have it both ways. It really is all or nothing!

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think this commandment begins with a statement of God's oneness?
2. What do you understand by "*love*" in this context?
3. How can we express our passion for God? Will it differ from person to person? If so, how might it differ?
4. In what ways can we show that we love God "*with all our mind*" without just becoming too intellectual and academic?
5. Why did no-one dare ask Jesus any more questions?

6. What are you going to do in response to this passage?