

Seek the other's well-being

The sermon given by Mr David Andrews at the Rosyth Methodist Church service of Morning Worship on the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 29 October 2023

The readings were: Deuteronomy 34.1–12; Psalm 90.1–6,13–17; Matthew 22.34–46



One of the Pharisees wanted to try to trick Jesus, to see if he really knew what the Scriptures said. He asked Jesus “What is the most important commandment?”

Over the last weeks the gospel has looked at Jesus and the Jewish authorities especially the Pharisaic tradition last week with the question about paying taxes to the occupying powers. The Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees – this refers to previous passage about resurrection which is missed out of the lectionary here.

The gospel continues the story of that final Holy Week with Jesus in the temple, perhaps still hoping that people will hear the words he brings, but knowing in his heart that the time for the end has come. So again he outlines the core of the good news in the Jewish scriptures as it is to be in the New Testament – love of God and each other – and in coded language talks of himself as being with God from creation. As the Law of Moses is the heart of the Jewish scriptures, the teaching of Jesus is its New Testament equivalent: both the Mosaic Law and Jesus command us to love our neighbour as ourself.

But isn't love an emotion we can't control? You can't tell someone what they must feel – you *will* love each other! No, for Jesus love is a conscious decision to seek the other's *well-being*. The commandment is to seek that well-being as we would seek our own.

Jesus was not the first to summarise the law as love for God and love for neighbour. It had already been used by the teacher Hillel who, when challenged to produce a summary of the law short enough for a convert to hear while standing on one leg, said:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour; this is the whole law. All the rest is a commentary to this law; go and learn it.”

In answering the Pharisees in this way, Jesus was showing how close to them he was in many ways. In his early ministry he had sometimes eaten with Pharisees and preached in synagogues they led. Don't we often find our bitterest opponents among those with whom we almost but don't quite agree, rather than people with very different views?

So perhaps the church has given the Pharisees too bad a press: Jesus shared their belief in the resurrection of the dead and he accepted their view of which books comprised the scriptures which still determines the contents of the Old Testament today.

But the Pharisees' failure to answer Jesus about the Messiah is the final sign that they have blinded themselves to the truth.





The Rabbi's tale – Francis Dorff

There was a famous monastery that had fallen on hard times. Once its many buildings had been filled with young monks and the big church resounded with singing, but now it was deserted. People no longer came to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the wood". And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and talk to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give a teaching but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you."

For a while, all was silent, then the rabbi said, "Now you must go."

The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from "The rabbi who walks in the woods" and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled by this saying. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. "Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Father Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could this mean?"

They were all very puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as people who had finally found something. But they prayed the Scriptures together as people who were always looking for something.

Occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men were asking, once again, to become part of the community.

In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

Is *this* a place where people want to come to be close to God?

Loving God and neighbour implies *being* loved. Are we able to accept love from each other as a sign of the grace of God poured out through others? Does our church major on loving God or on loving each other – those we know well and those we have never met – or are we able to get the balance right, whereby we see God's love and grace all round us and are able to respond in love to him and to all created people?

In a place where attitudes to strangers both at home and abroad are becoming increasingly harsh, with increasing antisemitism and islamophobia, Jesus' words again challenge us to show our love for him by acting and speaking for those who need our support and at the same time remember our first call to love God.

Lord our God, give us grace both to hear and to act on the great commandments of your kingdom, that we may love you with all our heart, and love our neighbour as ourselves – today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

The tale David told appears in several places on-line as *The Rabbi's Gift*. It was written in 1979 by the much-loved hermit, Francis Dorff, who belonged to the Premonstratensian Order (the 'White Canons'), and has been published most recently in his book *The Spiritual Journey of a Misfit, A Personal Pilgrimage*.

Our picture is found on a number of websites dating back to 2012: we found it used to illustrate Dorff's story at <https://www.fumcmanchester.org/the-rabbi-s-gift-an-untold-story>. You can listen to a slightly different version of the story as used by Scott Peck and his team at <https://chattanoogaendeavors.org/service/community-building/the-rabbis-gift/>.