

The Greatest Miracle

When the worship team was determining who would cover the services while Elisabeth was away travel schedules dictated the assignments. It came as a surprise when I looked at the readings for the day which fell to me. It was the Fifth Sunday of Easter which I had done three years ago. That was the second service after Elisabeth's traffic accident.

My first reaction was to recall the turbulent emotions which arose from that event. The second was to wonder how I could work again from readings I had used before. As I read and reread the passages I realized that they might be the same as they were three years ago but since then I have changed and we have changed. So it is that scripture is always the same but always new.

This year the passage which caught my attention was the one from 1st John. I suspect it was because Elisabeth had concluded her sermon on "Where is God?" with a verse from this reading. Two words in this reading stood out: commandment and love.

In a sense 'commandment' is an Old Testament word – particularly as in the Ten Commandments. Love is a strongly New Testament word. For my own curiosity I looked up the uses of both words in the New Testament. Let me share with you what I found. Here are the commandment passages.

Mark

"Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "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.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

John

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Paul in Romans

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

1st John

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

It is interesting to contrast the nature of the Old Testament commandments with those of the New Testament. The Old Testament focuses on what we must **not** do whereas the New Testament is concerned with what we **must** do.

It is hard for most Christians to appreciate what it was like to live according to "The Law". A few years ago I read a most delightful and enlightening book entitled *The Year of Living Biblically*. The author read the Bible for four weeks, five hours a day recording every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice. It made for a very long list – seventy two pages with over 700 rules.

The vast majority of these rules are in the Old Testament. Because most of us do not read the Bible in its entirety we do not realize the extent to which "The Law", in its broadest sense, regulates every aspect of life in excruciating detail. Many of the regulations are concerned with what you can eat and with whom you can associate. There is also a great deal concerned with ritual purity – the avoidance of uncleanness – and with the blood sacrifices which must be made to atone for violations of the law.

The contrast between the Old and New Testaments is stark. The Old Testament has ten commandments and countless rules. The New Testament has two Commandments and a few guidelines. That said, which is the more difficult to follow? Any comparison is hard because the Old Testament is based on diligent following of the many rules whereas the New Testament requires exercising judgement in the application of a general commandment. The general commandment is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

There are many passages in the New Testament which refer to the love required by this commandment. Here are just a few from Paul's writings.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. ... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whatever else one may think about Paul, there is no doubt that he knew how to speak about love. When we are commanded to love our neighbour, this is the kind of love we are expected to offer.

This love is anything but easy. In the reading from the First Epistle of John it says "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen". In Matthew the bar is raised even higher. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." It is easy to love those we like but we must love those we dislike, even those we fear and loathe.

I suspect that most of you are acquainted with the Star Wars films so you may recall the famous quote from Yoda who said "There is do or not do, there is no try". In light of this the Old Testament is **not do** while the Christian life is **do**. That is all very well if you are a Jedi knight. We are merely humans aspiring to follow the way of Jesus. The reality is that **do** is more than we can achieve. The best we can manage is **try**.

Now this may sound a bit disappointing but it is realistic. In Holy Week, we were reminded of the story of Peter's three times denial of Jesus. This is the same Peter of whom Jesus said Peter is the rock on which the church will be founded. Some rock! At the end of the Gospel of John there is this passage.

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

This is very peculiar until you realize that the word 'love' in this passage is represented in Greek by two different words. In colloquial terms these could be translated as 'unconditionally care for' and 'like as a best friend'. Here is the passage in colloquial terms.

"Simon son of John, do you unconditionally care for me?"

He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that you are my best friend."

A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you unconditionally care for me?"

He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that you are my best friend." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, are you my best friend?"

Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that you are my best friend."

Twice Jesus asks Peter for the most demanding form of love and gets the easier form. The third time Jesus accepts that Peter is still not up to the mark and settles for the best Peter can offer.

We are all like Peter. Our best falls short of perfection. It falls short of what God wishes for us. It even falls short of what we would wish for ourselves. But this is not a cause for despair.

The question we face is what happens when we try but fail. In the Old Testament failure is sin and sin merits punishment. Jesus changed that. The response to failure is confession and repentance. Confession is not wallowing in guilt, it is simply the recognition of failure. Repentance is more complex. It requires an attempt to make amends where another has been injured, an attempt to understand how failure occurred and then to resolve not to repeat the same failure. The most important thing is to recognize that confession and repentance allow God's mercy and grace to confer forgiveness. In this process the love between self and God makes possible the restoration of love between self and other. The author of First John says it well. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

I titled this reflection 'The Greatest Miracle'. You may well wonder, which is it? The feeding of the five thousand? The cleansing of the lepers? The restoration of sight to the blind man? Great though these may be they are not the greatest. The greatest miracle Jesus performed was to change forever our understanding of God. No longer is God the mighty warrior who annihilates our enemies. No longer is God the stern judge who metes out punishment to those who fall short of perfection. For Jesus, and now for us, God is like a kind and supportive parent who offers us unconditional caring love, who supports us in what we do and who offers us healing forgiveness when we fall short of perfection. What greater miracle could there be.