

Matthew 22:34-46

Sunday 29th

I have been in Milan. My son knows that you go to Milan to watch AC Milan. My daughter knows you go for Prada, Versace, Gucci, and Dolce & Gabbana. My wife thinks you go for the Duomo, Leonardo da Vinci and perhaps chicken Milanese. But I, sad man that I am, I believe Milan is the place where, in 374, they showed us how to choose a bishop. When the Diocese of Bristol has to choose a bishop, in 2017, committees meet, agendas are flogged through, statements written, online surveys arranged, brows furrowed and pencils sucked. In 374, when an election began in Milan, Ambrose, the local governor, went to a bad tempered meeting to call it to order. While he was speaking, a cry went up 'Ambrose for bishop'. He did not have a degree in theology, he was not even baptized, but they made him their bishop. Now, it would save us all a lot of time and stress if, at the end of this service, you could shout 'Nicola for bishop' and carry her shoulder high to consecration. You would have to carry her all the way to Lambeth and then persuade the Archbishop, and indeed the Queen, but that is just detail.

Ambrose, the bishop, became a great theologian. His background in politics also served him well. He lived at a time when the church had local customs. In Rome, they fasted on a Saturday, in Milan they did not. When asked, by a visitor, what he should do, Ambrose replied,

Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more

Which, in time, became our saying *When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*

Now, this business of how you behave, what you do in one place, and not another, is very interesting. In our conversation about what sort of a bishop we are going to have, we have been talking about whether Bristol has some local rules. You see the Church of England is committed to something called mutual flourishing. What that means is that if I am someone who believes that women can be bishops and you are someone who believes that women cannot be bishops we are both entitled to take a full part in the life of the church, we should both be able to flourish. So, I can argue that the next bishop might be a woman, and you can argue, not just that a woman should not be our bishop, but even that a man who will not ordain women could be our bishop. That does happen, the Bishop of Chichester does not ordain women, and you may remember a lively debate in Sheffield, when it was announced, last January, that the new bishop, Philip North, would not ordain women. Would we welcome a bishop who does not ordain women?

That is a complicated argument and this is not a sermon about ordaining or not ordaining women. This morning, I am interested in the idea that you can have one rule in one place and another rule somewhere else. I am interested in that because of the gospel reading we have just heard

a lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Let's think about the story we heard, for a moment. Jesus is surrounded by a hostile audience, there has been a sequence of trick questions. The Herodians wanted to know 'Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar? Say No and you anger the Romans, say Yes and pious Jews hate you. Then Sadducees (who do not believe in resurrection) ask him about a woman who married seven

times, 'In the resurrection who will be her husband?' Now there is a third question, equally contentious. This time it the Pharisees, the experts on the Law

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

This was the question Pharisees always asked at their parties. It was *the* topic of conversation. You are interested in law, but which law come first? Which is great and which small; which demand is light, which is heavy? Jesus himself, seems to enter this territory. You may remember him saying,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith".

Matthew 23:23

The Pharisees will know what answer to expect, they are putting Jesus to the test. He answers by citing the bible. His answer is a quotation, from Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18)

"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. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Now, just to tidy up some possible misunderstandings, that business of heart soul and mind. Jesus is not saying you will love with your heart AND with your soul AND with your mind. It is not as if he says, you will love like this on Monday AND Tuesday AND Wednesday. Jews would not think of heart soul and mind as separate things. Jesus just meant we must love God *utterly*. Then, we need to notice too, that Jesus says that loving God *is the greatest and first commandment*. Now, this time, he does mean it is both the greatest AND the first. There is a greatest AND first commandment, which is *to love God*, but a second commandment, which is to love your neighbor. Jesus gives a 'both / and' answer and he avoids the trap the Pharisees set.

What has all that got to do with Ambrose, doing as the Romans do and ordaining, or not ordaining, women? Because we live in a morally complicated world we do accept the idea that you can live with more than one way of thinking. In England, same sex marriage was legalized in 2014, the same year that in Nigeria they passed the same sex marriage (prohibition) bill. The Anglican Communion lives in a very uneasy tension over that and over ordaining and not ordaining women with different assumptions in different places. Which law is the greatest? Now, one of the ways we get round this is to argue that law is a blunt instrument. If the law says you must hang a murderer, but you think the murderer was acting under the influence of drugs given by someone else, or deluded, or under duress you might argue that the law is one thing and loving action another. There is a whole branch of ethics that says that laws do not work, what matters, what *really* matters, is that we do the loving thing. *Not always do this*, never do that; not even *do as the Romans do*; but do the loving thing.

And Jesus says *Love God and love you neighbour*. Jesus says, *do both things*. Jesus says *you cannot have one without the other*. You cannot love God if you do not love your neighbour; you cannot love your neighbour if you do not love God.

It is just possible, by now, that you feel a headache coming on. Let me put it another way, with a nod to a friend who once explained this to me. Let's imagine a game of rugby, Roger Dubois' Verger XV against Canon Gainsborough's Marines. That is a game we would all like to see. If

this game is to played well there are two things the players must get right. They must play well, play with skill *and* they must play by the rules, they must not cheat. If they play without skill, if they cannot kick well, or they cannot catch the ball in the air they will lose the game. If they play outside the rules, if they think they can pass the ball forward. or go on playing outside the pitch, well then, they are not playing badly; in truth they are not playing the game at all. A game in which Glynn can throw the ball forward, or Roger can race up into stands pursued by a Royal Marine Colour Sergeant is not rugby at all.

That is the point Jesus is making. Jesus knows that love comes from God. As the First Letter of John puts it

Let us love one another, because love is from God! John 4:7

I cannot love my neighbour, I cannot know what it is to truly love my neighbour, unless I know what love is. And love is a gift of God. We do not make it up as we go along. If we think we choose what loving looks like, what loving action might be, we have lost faith. We are doing something interesting, but we are not people of faith. We are no longer Christian. The first commandment, and the greatest, is to love God. You cannot love your neighbour if you do not love God. And, of course, if you love God and do not love your neighbour, well then you do not truly love God.

There is here, enough to be getting on with, a conversation I might continue another day, or you might have over lunch. Today, I have just tried to explain what Jesus meant when he told us to love God and love our neighbour. I think he meant that we are supposed to love another, but understand that is a *discipline*. Love is not just nice feelings, the cosy reassurance that if I think I am nice it all OK. Love is the gift of God that I am summoned to understand and accept. Love is a practice, a mindset, a habit to acquire. Love has boundaries. Much to our surprise, there are some rules, things we must, or must not, do.

To return to the problems that a church faces as it makes difficult decisions and tries to do that in a loving way we begin to understand the dilemma. Compromise and accommodation feels a reasonable way of proceeding, you blur the boundaries and keep pretending you are playing the same game. The problem is that the love of God is not founded on compromise or accommodation, it is absolute. Love does not make a series of compromises until we reach the place that gives least offence, least often. Love is the furnace that fashions something new and takes us where we never expected to go. We love God, then we love our neighbour and doing that we see the world afresh.