

St Michael's 29 10 23

Matthew 22 v 34-end

Everywhere we go there are rules. There are certain rules in our homes, there are rules at school, laws of the land and so on. We must learn to follow the rules if you want to get along in this world.

If we all did what we wanted entirely motivated by self-interest, there would be chaos. Anarchy is characterized by lawlessness. The question is what motivates our moral and ethical position. Is it strict obedience to the letter of the law or something else?

The Pharisees and the Sadducees had been trying to trap Jesus by asking him moral and legal questions. They had asked him about the lawfulness of paying taxes, and about the resurrection which was a subject hotly disputed between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had found him to be a remarkable opponent, but on the occasion of which we read in our Gospel today they must have thought they had finally found a way to entrap him, for they considered

themselves to be on firm ground as they planned to ask him about– the Scriptures. And more specifically the Ten Commandments.

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

So...the trap was set...

God gave to Moses Ten Commandments They began with Loving God then there was the second about loving one’s neighbour and then a number which set out things not to do. In Old Testament times a loving God was a completely new concept.

In a culture where pagan God’s were objects of fear to be placated by sacrifice, and worshiped in order to avert disaster, the idea of a God who cared for his people and whose steadfast love ran like a golden thread through their history was unique and to many incomprehensible. Even the Israelites found it difficult to understand. But as God revealed himself to them down the ages, they gradually realised that the one true living God was different to the pagan God’s of their neighbours. With this realisation the rules which governed their communal lives changed and the

laws set out in the Ten Commandments; Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not murder etc. were expanded so that by the time of Jesus there were 613 laws which a good Jew was expected to keep. It was a colossal task which it was virtually impossible to adhere to.

The problem was that Jesus response to the question of which is the greatest law, opened him to a dilemma, for if he singled out one law, what of the others.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were trying to trap Jesus, if they could get Jesus to pronounce one law the most important, they would be able to discredit him.

His reply to them was succinct, “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 neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

One of the qualities which I was brought up to hold in the highest esteem was integrity.

In our 21st western society there is considerable pressure to be successful often at the expense of integrity.

It raises the question as to the difference it would make to the church today, if Christians were as enthusiastic and inspired about their spiritual development as the secular world is about economic growth and making money.

Maybe it would be a useful exercise when we each have a spare half an hour during this coming week, to count up the amount of time we spend on each activity of the day, the time, energy and money we devote to our secular activities and compare that with our spiritual moments. How do they figure put side by side and how much is the one inter- woven with the other?

We need to think very carefully where our love and loyalties lie. What is our motivation for the way we do things and the priorities we have?

Are we motivated by trying to please other people to gain their good regard and build up our “street cred.”

We need to remember that while men and women look on the outside, God looks on the heart

So, let us cut to the bottom line and ask ourselves the question,

In this spiritual journey which we are on, what is our motivation? Are we influenced by our desire to please our fellow human beings or by our longing to please God?

There is no place for boastfulness and outward show before God. God is not impressed by the sort of smugness which performs good works in order to gain special merit and receive acclaim from those around us.

Our Christian life needs to be approached in a spirit of humility which recognises our need of God and his loving forgiveness.

It is not our outward façade and attitude which is important in our approach to prayer and worship or even good works, but the motivation and state of our innermost hearts.

Good stewardship of all that we have and are, should be to the glory of God and for the wellbeing of others prompted by love.

For our priority as Christians, is to seek the kingdom of God in all things and to be transformed by God's grace into the people He wants us to be.

The lawyer asked Jesus for one great commandment, but Jesus gave him two — love God — love your neighbour. The two go together. Each leans on the other and helps to support it.

Human love is firmly rooted in the love of God.

St John's epistle says this:-

We love because He first loved us.