

Reading: Matthew 22:34 - 46

Theme: All we are

Date: 25 October 2020

Some of you may be familiar with an American musical from the 1950s called *Damn Yankees*. The story of a baseball fan who does a deal with the devil to become the new star recruit to help his team win the pennant. Being all about baseball, I doubt if there was ever a stage production in Australia, although I have often thought that a little editing could produce a version about AFL. Satisfy the dreams of a few fans. There was, however, a movie version starring Tab Hunter and Gwen Verdon and the wonderful Ray Walston as the devil, that you may have seen. In one scene, the coach is trying to encourage his players, because the team hasn't seen success in decades, by telling them, "this game of baseball is only one-half skill, there's something else, something bigger ...

*Ya gotta have heart
All you really need is heart
When the odds are sayin'
You'll never win
That's when the grin should start.*

Is that what comes to mind when you hear the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart? Not the song, the sentiment. Heart being about grit and determination and hope. Or do you think of the heart as being the centre of feelings and emotions? My heart was so full it overflowed with tears.

Do you have some dim memories of catechisms and Sunday School exams? Is that what loving God with all your mind is about? These days we talk in terms of understanding and theology; the head stuff. The mind is where you come to terms with what God, Jesus and the Spirit means. Or maybe you consider that mind is about the way you make decisions in life. Not with emotions, but with reason and information. There's a great cartoon series that pops up on social media regularly where the brain and the heart compete over behaviour – emotion versus reason.

But what of this third part? A lot of people these days don't feel comfortable talking about soul, even if it's interpreted as 'your deepest real self'. We prefer the versions that say heart, mind and strength. However, plenty of people talk about spirituality, that sense that there is something about us, about our identity and reality that isn't just physically existing. So, it makes some sense to love God with the part of you that connects with the divine.

But you see, this question to Jesus - an essential question for a religiously based culture that was all about the commandments of God – "What is the greatest, the most important, commandment?", has a powerful answer. It's not about those bits and pieces of ourselves – What does heart mean? What does mind mean? What does soul mean? – it's about all those bits and pieces working together; all that we are. Love God with all your heart, and all your mind and all your soul. Love God with all that we are; that is the greatest commandment. And the second most important

commandment fits with it, because it also refers to our whole self; love your neighbour the way you love yourself. All the teachings of the Law and all the messages of the prophets come from, depend on, and refer to these two prime commandments. And the irony is that the people asking this question of Jesus knew the answer – it was the standard accepted answer as shown by the versions of this story in the other Gospels – but they didn't live it.

There are two stories travelling together in these chapters of Matthew. One is the telling of the rising level of confrontation and antipathy towards Jesus. A story that describes the causes and rationale of the crucifixion. Jesus was clearly a threat to the powerful leaders of Jerusalem and Judea; both religious and political. A threat so great that they put aside their mutual hatred and combined to get rid of Jesus. It's one thing to talk about God and offer prayers and sacrifices to God, but it's another thing all together when God shows up and asks you to give an account of yourself!

But the other story, running alongside, is the critique of the living out of the faith in God that was Judaism at that time, and the parallel warning to the new church of Jesus Christ. Jesus saying, "You are not taking your faith in God seriously". The answers to the testing questions from the religious leaders, and the challenging parables aimed at those leaders, in chapter 22, and then the outright criticism in chapter 23, all have this underlying critique.

"You know what God requires of you, but instead you live your own lives and only pay lip service to God. You may love God with all your mind, but your heart isn't in it. Your soul may be connected to God, but your mind is focussed on your reputation or security. You may be fired up with all the zeal of your heart, but your soul is not letting you see God in people around you."

We cannot read the Gospel stories as if Judaism is another, wrong, religion. We believe in the same God, follow the same scriptures and look to the same hope. So, this critique of them is also a warning to us. The original purpose of the written Gospels was not just to preserve the teaching of Jesus but to be the instruction manual for new disciples. Teaching them about the faith but also teaching them how to live the faith. When we read Jesus saying to a teacher of the Law, "You are not far from the kingdom of God", it shouldn't cause us to puff out our chests and say, "We've got it right." It should cause us to reflect on how close we are to the kingdom of God.

An old method for studying scripture is to place yourself as one of the characters in the story and reflect on how you would feel or how you would think. And if you can't place yourself in these stories as a Pharisee, or Sadducee, or Herodian, then you have missed an important point in the Gospel.

Our modern culture of power, assertiveness and the dominance of the individual can make a prime commandment about love look a bit vague and wishy washy. But if you love God with all your passion, and all your emotions, and all your decision making, and all your real, inner self, then all your thoughts and all your actions and all your relationships will be coloured by the gracious, accepting and compassionate love of God. This is not vague and wishy washy, this is real, serious,

life affecting stuff. And you can see where last week's instruction to give to God what belongs to God fits in – *all we are* belongs to God!

There are church leaders around the world who, in the face of the pandemic, are behaving as if the greatest commandment is to gather together and fill the church with worship. And loving God with all your heart and all your soul might lead you in that direction; there is a deep desire to gather and worship in all of us. However, also loving God with all our mind calls us to safety and concern for other people and analysis of risk, and to ask questions like, "If we can only have 20 people for worship, which 20?" Loving God with all that we are leads us to see worship opportunities all around us, and ministry opportunities with every lonely person, and refocusses us on being the church and not just going to church.

The great love of God, shown graciously in Jesus, calls out love from us in response. What sort of love? Love that comes from and is expressed through all that we are – passion, emotion, intellect, spirit, identity, sense of humour, interests and abilities – so that all that we do will be as ambassadors for, and people of, God.

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