



*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.*

So the cry went up every morning and every evening in the Temple, and it still forms an important part of synagogue worship - Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And in that bold statement of monotheism is the context of what follows; if there is only one God then there is no reason for split allegiance, you

shall love the one and only God with all that you are and all that you have. And if there is only one true God then recognising and honouring God is most definitely the first and primary commandment. And, by the same logic, if there is only one true God then all of us are the product of the same creative process and all of us are irreducibly worthy of love. Love your neighbour as yourself; not with all you have for that would make your neighbour an idol, and there is only one God, and not less than yourself for that would deny the creation of all people by the one God. Matthew's version of this encounter between Jesus and a scribe adds for clarity, 'on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

However, as with all scripture, it is not that neat and easy. The one who is saying, 'love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength', is mired in controversies that lead to the cross. And the original context of 'love your neighbour' instructs the people to reprove their neighbour as well as not bearing grudges. This is not an ancient scriptural version of a Beatles love song - All you need is love! This is the hard road of recognising that loving God and loving neighbour means honouring the moral and ethical consequences of that love.

And the language of these commandments mean that it is not that neat and easy. The primary commandment is not, "Listen up people, the Lord your God is one". The commandment is addressed to and binds a community - "Hear, Israel, our God is one". It could be argued that the whole purpose of the law is to make community possible. The binding force of the community is not just family or geography, it is allegiance to and love of the one true God who calls for that love to flow through the community. In the context of Israel and Deuteronomy, the God who is not only the creator but the One who saved the people and brought them out of slavery in Egypt. The only way they will survive as a people is through the whole community taking responsibility for obedience and love for the one true God.

But the language also shows the tension of the cultural blend from the tribal, kinship-based community of Israel to the new communities of faith in Jesus Christ beyond Palestine and Judea. The original version of the primary commandment, in Deuteronomy, calls for 'all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength'. The shift in Mark, and on to Matthew and Luke, is to insert 'all your mind'. This may seem like a small change, but the wider, Greek and Roman world, honoured the mind; the individual. These new communities formed through faith in Jesus as the Christ were not bound by family ties, or common interest or place in society, but they could be of one mind. Hear, O Community

of Christ, the Lord our God is One and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. Individuals in community. And as individuals, that second commandment takes on a renewed importance. Love your neighbour, not as a family member or fellow citizen, but with the same regard and concern that you have for yourself.

This tension between the individual and the community has become prominent in our current society. Both because our society is increasingly slanted to the individual - talk of rights with no mention of responsibilities, valuing of opinions above collective wisdom, and a huge shift away from membership of associations or societies - and because we have a blurring of what we mean by community. Yes, we are called into the community of a congregation for worship, and sharing and caring, and mutual support and growth. The old adage of a coal losing heat when taken out of the fire is still true. However, we all live in a wider community, and communities, as well, and our obligations to the commandments of love apply there also. When Jesus told the parable of the wounded traveller and the Samaritan, it was shocking and memorable, because the 'hero' of the story was most definitely not a member of the community, and yet showed love for neighbour. The tension between the individual and the community doesn't need a choice but a holding of balance. In recognising one, true God, Creator of all, we can see neighbours all around us. But in recognising one, true God, we are called into the community of faith and worship.

And all those considerations collide as the church, in all its many places and expressions, deals with the issue of vaccination. We pride ourselves on welcome and hospitality - it's in our mission statement - and yet, out of love, we have a concern for the safety of those in the gathered community. Can we hold a balance and reconcile those competing philosophies? It feels like being forced to decide who to love; to decide 'who is my neighbour'? Is it an expression of the hard love, that seeks moral and ethical standards, to not allow an unvaccinated person into the service, because they unnecessarily risk the health of others? Or is it an expression of that hard love to ask the community to take a risk in welcoming in someone seeking God? Where is our balance of individual and community?

And we are already seeing many answers to this tension. Some churches have chosen to offer two services each week: one for fully vaccinated and one with the restricted size of no vaccination requirement. Some have chosen to remain online so that there is no requirement for vaccination or restrictions. And some, like us, have chosen to have one service, following the regulations of only allowing fully vaccinated people to attend, so that service can have the maximum number in attendance, and be a safe place of worship. Each community seeks the answer that works for their situation, but each community can also see other answers and other possibilities.

The primary commandments for our faith are love, but that is not the wishy washy, emotional, accepting love of popular music. We are called to the hard road of love that seeks obedience, mutual respect, and service. The love of the cross. The love of enemies. The love of the unlovable. In Christ we know we are loved, let that love flow through our worship, our devotion, and our living.