

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Mark 12:28-34

Theme: *“The greatest commandment and the great promise”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

To so many who stand outside the Christian Church, and I might add, a good many who are inside the church, the Christian Faith is all about the rules. If you do what God wants, if you obey the Ten Commandments, you'll get into heaven. Jesus will fix a good place for you. Well God knows and the Bible tells us that no matter how hard we try to keep God's commands, we make mistakes, we let God down.

So to make up for our shortcomings, our failures, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came to remind us of God's expectations of us, but also to fulfil these expectations perfectly. Jesus both tells us God's greatest commandment and he brings us his great promise.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The problem with the Law

It is easy to understand why the Christian Church is labelled as being all about the rules. So important are the Ten Commandments, they are recorded in the Bible in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. In today's gospel reading when Jesus was asked by the teachers of the Law as to which was the most important, Jesus summarised the Ten Commandments into two. Love God, and love your neighbour. Certainly Martin Luther maintained the centrality of God's Law by including the Ten Commandments, together with his explanations of them, at the very beginning of his Small and Large Catechisms. There is no escaping the Law.

Unfortunately we don't like the Law too much. We want to be free and to be able to determine our own destiny. It would be much better if we could decide what was best for us and to be left to our own devices. But as pleasing as this might sound, imagine for a moment if this was true in our everyday lives. Perhaps the best example is to imagine the chaos on the roads if every driver did what they wanted, ignoring the impact for others. There are many other examples, such as the rules we have in schools so that people can get along together, each person supporting others so everyone benefits from a good learning environment.

Now when people choose to break the rules, there are consequences. On the road, people get hurt or they die from accidents. In the school or workplace, relationships are damaged and everyone's ability to do good work suffers. The laws and rules are put in place for our good. In fact when Moses teaches the Ten Commandments to the Israelites in the Book of Deuteronomy he spells it out for them, “You shall walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you” (Dt 5:33).

So God's Law plays a very important role in the lives of his people. It tells us what we need to do so that we live in a perfect relationship with God and with other people.

God's Law also plays another important role and that is to show us when we make mistakes, when we don't live in a way that pleases God. Here the Law accuses God's people and reveals to us the truth that we don't measure up to God's standard of perfection. Romans 3:23 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” No one is exempt from this accusation and so even though the law is perfect, we human beings are not perfect and so we cannot save ourselves. Even from the mouth of Jesus, the law summarised into loving God and then loving our neighbour, is a unbending rod by which we are measured and found to be wanting.

The great promise

As we prepare young people for confirmation, we spend quite some time discussing God's law and what the impact of this law means for all people and for each one of us as individuals. We draw pictures of uncrossable chasms and we use all sorts of examples to highlight our best but ultimately futile efforts to save ourselves. What we need to bridge the divide between ourselves and God is the Cross of Jesus Christ. As one student said, “we need a Cross to get across”.

So while we may spend a lot of time talking about God's law, we also spend a lot of time talking about how Jesus lived in a way that was in perfect unity or harmony with God and his laws for all people. By keeping God's Law, Jesus was able to die as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all people. Jesus' death on the cross enables us to get across the gulf between us and God.

This is the promise Jesus holds out for all people. Marks gospel says, “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). Here it is. Be baptised, be adopted by God as one of his children, believe that Jesus died on the cross in your place, and Jesus’ promise is that you will be saved. You will be saved to eternal life. You will be guaranteed a place in heaven – not because you have kept the rules, but because Jesus has kept them for you.

Christian Living

Well that sounds great. If Jesus has kept the rules, doesn’t that mean we don’t have to do anything any more? On the one hand the answer is “Yes”. There is nothing you can add to Jesus’ work of winning salvation for you. But on the other hand, James writes, “faith, by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jas 2:17). Here James points out that God has created each of us for a purpose. We all have skills and abilities that add to the fabric of our homes, our families, our schools, our communities. Jesus hasn’t died on the cross so we can be smug in our salvation, ignoring the needs of other. If we live without caring for and loving other people – if we ignore God and pretend he has no place in our lives, we are really saying we don’t believe in God at all. Christian faith will always produce good works that help to bind together and heal broken communities.

In many ways this is what Confirmation means. These young people are about to confirm the faith that was poured into them when they were baptised, whether this was earlier in today’s service or many years ago. They are saying, “Yes, we believe in the Triune God, we believe that Jesus died in my place, fill me with the Holy Spirit so I may shine the light of Christ wherever God has placed me.”

But as they make their confirmation, God also makes his confirmation. “You are my child, with you I am well pleased because you are covered over with the righteousness of Jesus. You are free to serve other people as I have first served you.”

Thirteen young people will be publicly confirmed today, but each person here today who is a baptised child of God and believes that Jesus has died for your sins is also confirmed by God that he loves you and equips you to serve others. It’s pretty simple really – love God and love your neighbour. How do you do this? Come to church so God can strengthen your faith and help others as you would like to be helped.

On this Confirmation Sunday, God’s greatest commandment remains firmly in place as does his great promise, “All who are baptised and believe will be saved.”

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.