

Sermon Sunday 11th July 2010
Trinity 6
Deut 30: 9-14, Col 1:1-14, Luke 10:25-37

God's requirements are devastatingly simple! Practical not pious.

Key text: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Lord, take my words and speak through them, take our minds and think through them and take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

I don't know how many of you like puzzles or working out mind games. I love and hate them. I love them because I like having to think laterally and engage in a bit of brain power, but I hate them because so often I can't solve them and so they're infuriating! I can also get a bit obsessive and preoccupied trying to solve them, so much so that I can completely forget to cook the tea or run someone up to brownies, and then not only do I have an unsolved puzzle but also several annoyed children!

Here's a quick brain puzzle for you to have a go at. TillyWilly likes apples but he hates bananas; he likes strawberries but hates fruit; he loves sitting but hates to stand, he likes hopping but hates to hop....Can you work out what TillyWilly likes? Well, I'm not going to give away the answer to the puzzle, (you'll have to check with me at the end of the service to see if you've worked it out correctly). Oh, I can see now that you're all going to spend the rest of this sermon trying to figure it out rather than listening to what I'm saying! That was bad planning!

The answer is devastatingly simple as is so often the case with puzzles, but we fail to see the simple answer because we assume it must be complicated! And it strikes me that our readings today say exactly the same about what God requires of us.

God's way is devastatingly simple, yet I think many of us fall, again and again, into the trap of trying to make it far too complicated. We assume there must be some sort of catch to it all. We fall into the trap of adding layer upon unnecessary layer to what discipleship entails, assuming that we can't really make it without jumping through more hoops, learning this, doing that. We start to add all sorts of extras to what God demands: "We can't be a real Christian if...we're not in church every Sunday, if we find it hard to pray, if we don't pray regularly, if we don't know our bible well, or haven't a clue about liturgy or the church's traditions, or get them wrong. We start to think that without all these complicated extras we can't possibly get to God; that eternal life is therefore beyond our reach, only for clever people, or only for really pious people. Yes we like to come to church, but we are less sure we're really OK in God's eyes, that we're really living up to what he wants of us. Sound familiar?

This is exactly the sort of thing that the lawyer was thinking as he approached Jesus with his infamous question at the start of our Gospel reading today: "**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**" This reading, The Good Samaritan Story, is so well known by us all that we can lose sight of some really important truths hidden within it. The lawyers opening question

is crucial to the story and underpins all of Jesus answer. **What must I do to inherit eternal life?** It's a question many of us ask today and we need to listen carefully to Jesus answer.

We're told by Luke that the lawyer was asking this in order to trick Jesus, because he felt sure that a simple answer was impossible and he wanted to prove the inadequacy of Jesus answer and show him up as a hoax. But he was also asking the question, as we ourselves often do today, because he really felt he wasn't up to the mark himself; that to please God we surely have to master all sorts of rituals and theological learning; that it's a very complicated thing to inherit eternal life! The question: 'What can I do to inherit eternal life?' then becomes a sort of excuse – living God's way is too complicated – there's no way I'm up to it; I'll just have to plod on with no assurance that I'm accepted, or that I'm living God's way, or that I'll get to heaven!

So what is Jesus answer? As he does so often Jesus answers the question with another question, turning it back to the lawyer himself. He knows the lawyer already knows the answer within him – it is summarised in the scriptures, in the law. And so the lawyer duly recites the *Shema*, the summary of the law, which he knows by heart: **“Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself”**. Jesus simply responds, ‘well, there you are; that’s it; do that and you will live; you will have eternal life’!

The lawyer is then incredulous. He came to Jesus wanting a complicated answer. Surely this simple answer isn't all there is to it. Surely that can't be all there is to it? Love God and love you neighbour. There must be more to it than that. He had hoped to come out of the encounter looking clever, but instead he is made to look stupid and, worse than stupid, unfaithful.

But it is not just this encounter between the lawyer and Jesus that shows God's demands are not complicated or elaborate. Our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy also suggests that living God's way is simple. We hear God saying to the people **“surely this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away”**. It's as if God hears the objections and excuses from the people, – loving God with all my mind and heart and soul is too difficult – and he shouts NO! It is not too hard for you; it is not impossible to reach – it's not across the furthest sea or unattainable up in the heavens. No says God, through the writer of Deuteronomy. The means and power to respond to my call to follow me is right inside you:

“the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (30:14).

Just as the lawyer knew the *Shema* by heart so God has put within us his Spirit, his living word – the means by which we respond to and live out his call, our discipleship.

So how do we react as we hear those words of command for ourselves today: Love God and love your neighbour and you will live? Firstly do we accept to take them just as they are, in all there simplicity, and not add any unnecessary extras that we demand of ourselves but aren't from God. Because that is exactly all God demands – just love me and love everyone around you. No added frills. Simple! We all need to keep our eyes and hearts set upon this

only as we live out our Christian lives. So many failings of our Church are because of unnecessary extras we add because we can't quite believe it's not more complicated. And so a wonderful pastor, preacher and theologian in St Albans might have become a bishop, should have become a bishop; women's ministry might have developed a lot sooner, our church finances might be healthier; Christian unity might be more of a visible reality; and our witness as Christian communities would be like that of the Colossian Church – seen as really going deeply into God, transforming communities and making new disciples.

It's simple, not complicated, **but simplicity doesn't mean easy!** And that's why we do fail, why we're not a perfect church. So the second thing we need to do, as well as keeping it simple, is to learn how to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In our own strength we can't. If we try too hard in our own strength, as the priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan story remind and warn us, then we will fail to love in the way God demands. Our piety is not what is asked of us. Piety and religious pig-headedness is not love. **Love is deeply practical and always flows from God's own love.** Love of neighbour means seeing God in everyone around us – the foreigner in our street, the teenagers in the bus shelter, the destitute and poor in Africa. It is everyone we come upon. And the love we show is not superficial, religious smiles; it is deeply transformative and life-enhancing to both involved in the encounter. Loving like the Samaritan did enhances the lives of both the lover and the loved. It is a love that breaks down all barriers of race, class, gender, faith, sexual orientation, age, personality. It is not confined to loving only within a particular group. Anyone can love those they like...but Good Samaritan love it is a love of those we even dislike and disrespect, those whose presence we feel tainted by, those we would prefer to have no association with. Because love like this involves no judgement, but is motivated by compassion, by mercy, by tenderness and an awareness of our own weaknesses.

But how can we love like this? Again it is simple but not easy. **We can only love in this way when we love in and through God's own love within us.** God says, through the writer of Deuteronomy, **this love is not far away; it is right beside you and in you;** simply turn and you will find me and then let my love transform you so that you live and love through me and I live and love through you! And this loving and living is eternal life.

So as with solving puzzles like what Tilly Willy likes – we need to remember two things; keep it simple and know that the answer lies already inside you. Simply turn to God and he can and will help us to live out this tremendous calling.

But don't complicate it. Just turn and love and live. Amen.