

Sermon for Sunday 3 November

4th before Advent/All Saints

Deuteronomy 6: 1 – 9; Hebrews 9: 11 – 14; Mark 12: 28 – 34

A Satnav for our Lives

I was talking to a friend the other day who is still hosting part of a Ukrainian family – a mother and son. They have returned this week to Ukraine for a half-term visit. The family will briefly be reunited, and will also be able to visit Grandma, who it seems, may be seriously ill. Ukraine is not a safe country, especially in the East where they come from. Air strikes continue. Will they decide to return permanently? How do you decide between safety and a good education for your son, or being with your husband, and with your mother in what could perhaps be her final months?

That's just one glimpse I've had this week into what it is like to be directly involved with one of the events we hear about on the news. And there has certainly been a lot of news this week! The

conflict still raging in the Middle East causes unimaginable suffering for hundreds of thousands of people. Meanwhile we've heard about unprecedented and deadly flooding in south-east Spain. Both sides in next week's US presidential election claim to have God on their side. We wait to see what happens. And in the UK, we've had the first budget from our new government, and a new leader of the opposition has just been elected.

In the midst of all this, even in our quiet corner that is Woburn Sands or Aspley Heath, we may feel the need of an anchor to live by. Something to hold on to. And our Gospel reading today contains one:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “...You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mark 12: 30b – 31a).

The first part of this commandment also appears in our first reading, from Deuteronomy – as part of the words of Moses - spoken before the people

of Israel entered the Promised Land. This is the 'Shema' – the prayer still recited by observant Jews morning and evening every day. And if you visit the home of an orthodox Jew, you may see a little box on the doorpost of their house. It will have these words inside. Some even have them as part of their dress, on their forehead, a constant reminder of the command to love God. They are to love God because he has chosen them to be His people, He has set His love upon them. This is their anchor, a way of constantly coming back to God whatever is going on around them. And, incidentally, many Jews in this country feel unsafe just now.

Coming back to our Gospel reading, we have this remarkably amicable conversation between Jesus and a scribe. Jesus has just been in dispute with some Pharisees and Sadducees who have been trying to trick him into saying something that will get him into trouble – either with the Roman or the Jewish authorities. But this scribe is not trying to trip Jesus up. He is genuinely interested in what Jesus will say. And they are in agreement. For them both, the heart of the faith

is love – being totally focussed on loving God, and also loving our neighbour.

This is why Jesus tells the scribe 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'. (Mark 12:34) And then there is silence. Jesus has already silenced his enemies. Now he speaks with authority, as one who has the key to kingdom of God. The scribe asks no more. But I imagine he must have gone on thinking about that conversation.

Jesus is the key to the kingdom of God. The one who shows us what God is like. The one who has shown us completely how much God loves us, by even being prepared to die for us.

It was All Saints Day on Friday, a day when we remember those Christians down the ages who stand out because they lived their lives devoted to God and to their neighbour. We have our own book of Saints and Pilgrims in St Albans Diocese. Some had public roles, others lived their lives much more quietly, among them Alison Bonnard from this church. There are many unsung saints. Those who have inspired us by their love for God and for their neighbour.

The Bible tells us “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). God set his love on his people Israel before he gave them that command to love in return. Likewise, there is no way that any of us can set out to love God and neighbour without first being secure in knowing that God first loved us. The saints are people who have understood how much they are loved by God, and who seek in their own various ways to share that love with others. Jesus invites us all into a journey of love and commitment to him which will go on for all of our lives and into eternity.

On Wednesday, at our service of confirmation some of our young, and not so young people will be taking the next step in that journey of commitment and love. As we support them and pray for them, let us remember above all that we are loved; we are invited to respond to that love, and to continue responding for the whole of our lives. That is our anchor, that will keep us loving God and loving those around us, whatever is going on in our lives, and no matter how turbulent the wider world becomes.

“We love, because he first loved us.”

Amen

Revd Diana Young