The Church of England
in Essex and East London
Diocese of Chelmsford

Last Sunday After Trinity

Sunday 25th October 2026

Readings: Matthew 22. 34-end

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The Bishop of Chelmsford

It's a tendency in today's society for people to get boxed into polarised positions, and to find themselves tied to ideas or actions at one extreme or another of any given spectrum. There can be great pressure to nail our colours to the mast of either/or; with less space to explore the both/and – the possibility that more than one thing might be true, even if those things seem to be contradictory. Jesus, on the hand, defied being locked in, again and again he challenged expectations, affirming and challenging people at the same time.

This is true not just in the account recorded in today's Gospel reading but throughout Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is presented both as an orthodox Jew who knew and understood the Scriptures and taught them well, and at the same time as someone who was a profound threat to the religious establishment of the day.

In today's passage a lawyer asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment of all. Jesus replies like any good Jew should, quoting well known texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus before adding his own imprint and providing a hint about his own identity as David's Lord, in other words the Messiah. In resisting the temptation either to be wholly conventional or to be so radical as to fail to make an impact, he draws his listeners in, and in the process provides a powerful summary of his own mission and ministry and opens a window onto divine priorities. Jesus reaffirms the central calling of the faithful: to love God and neighbour, and positions himself as the Christ, the one who would bring about God's kingdom.

It is no surprise then that in the Diocese of Chelmsford in seeking to articulate our direction of travel and shared values we have built on the principles in Matthew 22. I refer you here to the document called Travelling Well Together in which we identify our purpose as being, "to love God and to love our neighbour; to worship faithfully and empowered by the Holy Spirit witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ as we serve the extraordinarily diverse array of local communities in Essex and East London." That is the heart of our faith and whatever else we may disagree on, surely we can agree on this fundamental principle and find therein our unity.

The danger is that the words, love God and love your neighbour are so familiar that they lose some of their power. So I hope today we might take the opportunity to notice once again their extraordinary significance in the life of any Christian and any church community – that we dwell with the words and are willing to be challenged by them. So let me offer just a few reflections based on two of the observations I had on reading the passage in preparation for this sermon.

The first is about *the power of questions*. Today's passage seems to me to be a dance between questions on one hand and proclamation on the other and as such it is a reminder that both have a place in helping to deepen faith. In today's passage there are two questions, one put to Jesus and the other posed by him to the pharisees.
At face value, it was the question asked by the lawyer that paved the way for the declaration Jesus made. Whether it was genuine or intended to trip Jesus up, Jesus took it seriously and answered in good faith, using the opportunity to make his declaration about the commandments of God.

We shouldn't be frightened of asking questions or of receiving questions from those who may come to us with their queries and their doubts and even their cynicisms. In being prepared to take

questions seriously we might well find that our own faith is deepened and that we are provided with an opportunity to proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ.

And when we turn to the Bible, sometimes we find that our questions are answered powerfully and at other times we might be provoked into asking even deeper questions. Answers, when we receive them clearly, are a gift from the Holy Spirit but questions might be too, for they spur us on in our desire for deeper understanding.

And my second reflection is about what it means *to truly love God*, as Jesus bids us do. It sounds like a fairly easy concept – it's rather difficult to pin down and no one can ever look at us and prove definitely whether we mean what we say. But when the idea of loving God is pinned to the command to love neighbour it takes on an added edge. For the point is that anyone who loves God must also love God's creation. Indeed, we cannot love God without loving that which God loves. And while the scribes and the pharisees used the law to place limits on those they were obliged to recognise as neighbours, in Jesus we encounter someone who breaks the bonds of custom and opens up the command to love, to include the whole of creation, including those who are different to us, those we disagree with and find difficult and even those who may be our enemies. Jesus refuses to identify love for God with rigid religious requirements or to identify faithfulness to him with loyalty to a particular type of community.

And let us not imagine that this passage speaks only to Jews of Jesus's day. In fact, it speaks directly to us. For as Christians we are not immune from the sort of religiosity that seeks to limit the love of Christ and which uses faith to include some and exclude others. His words are as relevant today as they ever were and, painful though it may be, they are directed towards you and me and towards every church community. They challenge us once again to soften our hearts and recognise that the gift of God's grace and the promise of salvation are open to all; and that God alone is judge. Our task is to be faithful in loving God through worship and witness and loving our neighbour through acts of humble service.

+Guli Chelmsford