

Trinity 18

In our second lesson for today, a question is put to Jesus by a group of Pharisees:

“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

It is difficult for us to appreciate the enormity of that questions because the answer is something, we as Anglican’s, already know. We read it at the beginning of every communion service. You may be able to get an idea of why this question was so important and also so loaded by allowing me to ask you a similar question.

“What is the single most important thing about the Christian faith?”

As we mull this over in our minds, many of us could probably come up with many aspects of Christian faith that are important. It might be difficult, and might even create a good discussion, if we were to pick one aspect above all others as being the most important, top aspect. It might even cause a spirited argument. An argument is just what the Pharisees were looking for and trying to provoke. There were over 700 commandments in the Jewish law, and every good Jew could agree that they were all given by God. But, when pressed as to which one was the most important they would not be able to come to a consensus.

The priests would say that the ceremonial laws were the most important of all. The Pharisees thought the moral laws were the ones that were the most important. There was disagreement depending on who you were talking to. Whatever Jesus said was bound to alienate a significant number of people. That was the whole reasoning as to why they asked the question in the first place.

But Jesus avoided the trap with a quotation from Scriptures:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

“That is what God demands of you”, Jesus tells them.

He wants everything you have and everything you are. Nothing is excluded.

Then Jesus went on to add another quotation from Scripture:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He linked the two quotations together and said, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

At this time the Law and Prophets were the books that constituted Holy Scripture for the Jewish people. So what Jesus was saying was that those two commandments together are what the Jewish religion is all about.

Notice that I did not say that is what the Christian religion is all about. What we refer to as the “Golden Rule” is part of our Jewish roots.

People who think of themselves as Christians because they profess to love God and treat their neighbors correctly would no doubt be shocked to learn that what they take to be the essence of the Christian faith is actually the essence of the Jewish faith. The essence of the Christian faith is contained in the next question that appears in the passage.

“What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?”

The answer to that question is what distinguishes Christians from Jews as well as Christians from Muslims or other highly moral pagans associated with the church. Is Christ simply an inspired, articulate teacher among others? Is He a superbly moral man, a religious fanatic, a social reformer, or is He really God Himself in human flesh?

The Pharisees were quick to answer, “He is the son of David.”

In other words, the Messiah is an ordinary guy with a famous ancestor. Jesus continued, So if that is the case, why does David in the Book of Psalms address him as Lord?”

The Pharisees did not know how to respond to that, so they simply went away. But this question is important and would not just go away. Even today this question persists. It is really the fundamental question of our time. Who is Jesus? Whose Son is He? Where did He come from? What do you believe about Him? What authority do you attribute to Him?

How you answer those questions determines whether or not you are a Christian.

The essence of Christianity is not a code of behavior or even a set of values. The essence of Christianity is a Person. What makes us a Christian is how we relate, or fail to relate, to that Person. Do we worship Him? Do we obey His commandments? Do we trust Him with our lives and our eternal destiny?

There are many people in this world that admire Jesus. Even the Muslim faith calls Him a prophet. Many see him as a martyr and a true inspiration as to what a godly, righteous man should be. But such people are not Christians unless they also call Him Lord and Savior.

Jesus asked the same question of His disciples that He asked the Pharisees. St. Peter replied,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you.”

St. Thomas fell to his knees when he saw the risen Christ and said, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus again said, “Blessed are you.”

Our second lesson is a great reminder that the problems of obedience to God and of future life have been with us for a long time. God died to take away our sins. The biggest sins were against the greatest commandments and we have failed to keep them. We have failed to love God with all our heart, with all of our soul and with all of our mind. We have also failed to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is why the Holy Spirit is still with us and is still guiding us. He is guiding us to love. If I can love God with all my heart, soul and mind then I am healed. I am healed where it matters most and that is in the ability to love others.

The Church throughout the ages has said, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the father, by whom all things were made.”

From the gospel according the St. Matthew: Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the laws and the prophets. “

To Him be all honor and glory, world without end. AMEN