

What Does God Command and Promise?

Today's sermon is a bit of a miscellany. There are several things in our lessons that called my attention and that I thought we should talk about.

Let's take first about the words of our Lord in the gospel reading, words puzzling to the modern reader. Not the love commandment, which, I think, we all get, but which we should ever keep in mind: love with the truest love possible our God and one another. Our Old Testament reading from Leviticus shows us that Jesus is emphasizing and generalizing a teaching of Jewish tradition: '...you shall love your neighbor as yourself...' (19.18)

But the puzzling part is the words about King David and the Messiah and who is lord of whom. Jesus is quoting from the opening verse of Psalm 110: The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.' David was regarded as the author of the Psalms and this verse was seen as referring to the Messiah. So David, the greatest hero in the history of the people, calls the object of God's statement 'my lord.' For us, this presents no problem. But for the Jews of Jesus' time it was a conundrum; no one was greater than David, not even the Messiah, so how could David have called him 'lord' in the psalm?

This little exchange occurs in a whole section in which Matthew deals with the issue of Jesus' authority. Jesus in debate gets the better of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the other teachers of the Law of Moses. Matthew is showing Jesus as the greatest teacher and the one with undoubted authority, even to calling into question the very Temple itself (Matthew 21.12-16) In this way, Matthew establishes Jesus' authority to teach and to command. It is the prologue to the passion narrative of His death and resurrection, and the authority these events will have in our relation to Jesus.

We are not Pharisees or Sadducees or teachers of the Law, but Matthew's point is just as sharp for us as for them. What is Jesus' authority for us? How much will we let Him in past our defenses? How much will we let Him question us? How much will we trust Him?

Other ideas that call to me come from our collect for this Sunday. The collect reminds me that for Episcopalians, as for other Anglicans throughout the world, our theology is contained in our praying, in our worshiping.

The collect first asks for an increase in faith, hope, and love (charity). Each of these is worthy of several books, let alone a single sermon, but let's summarize what each one means, so that we can better understand what we are praying for. Faith is trust in God; it is the knowledge of who He is and what She does, as well as a friendship with that Divinity; for the Christian, Jesus makes that friendship easier.

Hope is trust in God and in the future that God is bringing into existence. It is the understanding that, though things may get difficult, we can trust God for our ultimate welfare, that we have no reason to protect ourselves from God. He's always on our side.

Love is our determined focus of good will and care upon another. It functions a bit differently when God is the focus of our love as compared to when creation is the focus. When we love God, the only thing we have to give that God doesn't already have is ourselves. Since God doesn't force Herself on anyone, that is the one gift we can give that God doesn't already have. When we love the creation, that is, our neighbor, our enemy, ourselves, the universe, we give the same thing, ourselves. We let down our defenses and let the other come into our self and we give ourselves into that person's inner being.. The difference is that creation and its pieces need our devotion and sacrifice to exist. It is love which creates a safe place for family. It is love which cares for the vulnerable: the widowed, the orphan, the poor, the sick, the dying. It is

love which creates a safe and nurturing community. It is love which values the planet so much that it plans and works so that others now and in the future may have as much as we ourselves.

Wow! Faith is trust in God's Person and friendship. Hope is trust in God's future. Love is trust in God's care and call. Our Prayer Book collect connects these three to God's promise and command. So it's natural to ask what these are.

What is God's promise to us? I think Jesus said it best, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." (John 14.27) Later on in that same gospel, Jesus says, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace." (John 16.33) After His resurrection, Jesus once again gives His best gift, "Peace be with you." (John 20.19) And then in one of our spiritual community's favorite stories, "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" (John 20.26)

This is what has been promised to you and me, the peace of Christ, which is the peace of God. God's peace operates in this world and in the next. It comforts and strengthens us here, in good times and in bad, and it is the foundation for the joy of our fulfillment in God's kingdom after our death.

Finally, our collect talks about command: 'make us love what you command.' What is commanded by God of us? Again, Jesus says it best, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15.12) Love one another. Not believe the same. Not act the same. Not talk the same. Not be comfortable together. Not be satisfied. But rather, love one another. Put the other first. Not an easy commandment but one worth working on, even for a lifetime, for the reward is beyond all understanding. When we receive the ultimate peace of God, we will understand what all our loving has been about.

As it does so often, The Prayer Book says it well: Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.