

I've chosen today's gospel reading because not only has it always intrigued me, but I also see in it, certain signposts which have led me to being the imperfect but faithful Christian I am today.

Firstly, let's look at the lawyer trying to put Jesus on the spot. When Bishop Andrew gave me the go ahead to start my ordination training, little did he know, that he was letting loose a card-carrying member of the awkward squad into the institution known as the Church of England. The trainers soon discovered that I could be relied upon to always ask the difficult question. And as for pointing out the deficiencies of the institutional rules and regulations....well, let's just say that Rev Jon may have got it right in one of my year end reports when he wrote....Terry does not tolerate fools easily.

Which qualifies me to understand exactly where the lawyer is coming from. He's not just thinking of the 10 commandments written on tablets of stone which Moses brought down from the mountain top, but the 613 commandments inscribed in the whole volume of Jewish law. Yes, 613 – 248 'thou shalls' and 365, 'though shall nots' - one for each day of the year. I can almost see him preening: 'get out of that one then, Jesus'

But the lawyer, fool that he is, had either totally overlooked or didn't understand that Jesus himself was a member of the awkward squad, par excellence. What's more he is blessed with such knowledge, wisdom and grace that he responds - just as he does when tested by the devil – by quoting scripture. The very same scripture we heard in our first reading. But he then goes on to expand the commandment by quoting from Leviticus about loving our neighbour as ourselves. Here is the

key to this encounter. Jesus is asserting his authority by uniting these two commandments, something above and beyond any Rabbi had previously done.

And whenever I read the words: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” my eye is always drawn to the word shall. I’m sure that the word commandment meant in those days exactly what it does today; it is an order; the command of one person to be followed by another. Jesus doesn’t say we *should* love the Lord our God. Should implies an invitation. An invitation to perhaps only love half-heartedly. No, Jesus is saying we shall love the Lord our God with 100% commitment - with all our heart, soul and mind.

Yet, I find this really challenging. To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul two thousand years on seems nearly impossible particularly if you think of love as an emotion and when it means so many different things to people. Think back to our childhood fairy tales...you know, where the prince meets the beautiful princess, they fall in love, marry and live happily ever after. They are inseparable. And as we grow up these same stories are re-told within romcoms, love songs, poems and books so that for many, if not most, love today is simply an emotion.

But the reality of my life experiences thus far at least, have helped me define and understand a different love. That there comes a time when you realise in your fairy tale that you are

quite capable of living without the love of your life but *choose* not to do so, and that is the start of real love. Like many of you, I have chosen to love God not just in the exciting times, but also in the mundane and not so good times. And yes, it is challenging to offer 100% commitment in the down times, not just in the up times when it is so much easier to do so.

It is a challenge because we cannot look directly into God's eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even see the face of Jesus. If we could, that might evoke in us a profound feeling of love. Nonetheless, to love God is our duty as Christians. It is what Jesus commands us to do.

Likewise, loving our neighbour is not easy, particularly if like me, you find that you have little in common with the other local residents. But as we learn from the parable of the good Samaritan, we can be merciful and gracious to strangers in an act of love which is totally in keeping with what the commandment requires. To do for the stranger, exactly what we would unhesitatingly do for the one we love emotionally shows we are being obedient to the commandment. But that, of course, entails us making a conscious choice and acting upon it, just as we do when we make a conscious choice to love beyond the fairy tale time in our lives.

And in just the same way we can choose God and serve him in every way. We can love with our heart: through consistent acts of kindness, gentleness and patience towards everyone. We can love with our soul: by worshiping God without distraction not

just on a Sunday but by setting aside time in every day of the week. And we can love with our minds: studying God's Word and letting it correct us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world. I'm not talking 24/7, but by loving whenever and wherever the occasion arises.

And can you see how "the greatest commandment" and the "second, which is like" are connected? When we love God's people, we are always, and at the same time, loving God. But importantly, it is not the emotion of love, which is commanded, only the action. And if people lived their lives by this commandment, most of the world's greatest problems would be solved overnight.

Each and every day we all face and deal with events and situations crying out for love; and as Christians, what sets us apart from everyone else in this world, is our choice of living out these two commandments to the best of our ability. Amen.

**Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 10 August 2025**