Sunday 8 February 2026: Second Sunday before Lent and Introduction to the Lent Course - Ian Wallis

Readings:
Amos 5: 4-24. Mark 12: 18-34.

Sermon: Introduction to the Lent Course – Ian Wallis
If I asked, 'What attracts you to Jesus?' – I wonder what you answer would be? Some of us, I imagine, would be inclined towards what, it is claimed, is unique about Jesus – he performed miracles, he taught with unrivalled wisdom and authority, he died for our sins, he was raised from the dead, he is the Son of God, the second member of the Holy Trinity, and so forth. For others, our attention would be drawn not so much to what was unique about Jesus, but to what was characteristic, which may not be the same.

Here our Gospel reading is insightful because it identifies what Jesus is remembered as sharing in common with his contemporaries, as well as what was particular about his vocation. The setting is the Jerusalem Temple, probably the outer court, although we're not told that; in fact, the whole scene may have been conceived to communicate what some believers had discovered to be at the heart of Jesus' faith.

Jesus is approached by a scribe, an expert in Jewish law who was responsible for administering justice as well as for the preservation of sacred texts – a significant establishment figure, as we would say today. He asks Jesus which is the premier commandment. Now, for a Jew in the first century, as well as at pretty much any other time, this is a no brainer – not least because they were reminded of it twice every day during the recitation of Shema:

> *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deut. 6.4–9; also Deut 11.13–21 & Num 15.37–*41)

Shema, taking its name from the first word of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 4 – Shema in Hebrew means 'Hear' – introduces Moses' exhortation to the Israelite people to pledge their allegiance to Yahweh, Israel's God: to love God wholeheartedly and, unusually for that time, exclusively – spurning all other deities. In Jesus' day, Shema was common currency, owned by faithful Jews far and wide, so there is nothing controversial or unusual here – also, nothing to distinguish Jesus from his contemporaries; but, if Shema was common currency, how it was understood and applied were not.

There isn't time to explore this in any depth, but it is helpful to gain some sense of the range of interpretations out there. For example, you will have heard of Pharisees. Pharisees were committed to loving God through practising a discipline of life shaped by obedience to God's covenantal ground rules, the Ten Commandments, and teachings found within the first five books of our Old Testament, known as Torah. Maintaining ritual purity was also central, limiting social interaction, especially during mealtimes, and requiring Pharisees to observe strict hygiene and dietary standards.

Then there were Sadducees who expressed their love of God through the practice of ritual and maintaining order. First and foremost, they were priests who serviced the sacrificial cult of the Temple – a building embodying God's presence among his subjugated people. Its sacrificial system, when administered correctly, was believed to possess atoning power, restoring covenant with God. Furthermore, Sadducees were shrewd politicians who had to steer a tricky

course keeping their Roman overlords amenable so that as much of the Jewish way of life as possible could be preserved.

Essenes – from the Aramaic, 'pious ones' – constituted another movement, this time, committed to loving God through communal living and following a rule of life. Essenes practised a kind of egalitarianism with members bound to one another by oath. Possessions were held in common ownership with Essenes sharing a pattern of life characterized by worship, labour, study, shared meals and the pursuit of an upright life.

Although spread throughout the villages and townships of Palestine, some opted to withdraw from public life altogether, including from the Temple, and to demonstrate their love of God through pursuing a monastic way of life. One of their monasteries was at Qumran on the north-west shore of the Dead Sea and we know more about their beliefs and practices than any other group through the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Another extreme interpretation of what it means to love God were freedom-fighters – not so much a definable group as a number of individuals and their followers who believed that loving God required taking up arms. Convinced that the kingdom of God was neither a spiritual dimension in this life nor a celestial one in the next, they sought to overthrow their oppressors through insurrection in order to re-establish the rule of God as in the halcyon days of Kings David and Solomon.

Nor should we fail to mention Jesus' mentor, John the Baptist, and his programme of loving God through moral renewal. According to our sources, John challenged his compatriots, especially influential Jews, to pursue a radical transformation through jettisoning godless ways and demonstrating acts of repentance, justice and good works. Set within an apocalyptic timetable in which God was soon to intervene in judgement, John's demanding and unpalatable agenda was injected with urgency, compulsion and verve – with coverts undergoing baptism as an external demonstration of internal transformation.

- Loving God through Obeying Torah
- Loving God through Ritual Observance
- Loving God through Communal Living, even Monasticism
- Loving God through Armed Insurrection
- Loving God through Moral Renewal

You see, in first century Palestine, there were different, sometimes contradictory, views on what loving God entailed. And although there are resonances with some of these, Jesus is remembered for championing another path. Remember that exchange between Jesus and a scribe recorded in our Gospel this morning, when the latter asks which is the premier commandment, and Jesus responds:

> *The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is 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.'*

But he doesn't stop there, he continues by quoting Leviticus 19.18:

> *The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12.29–31; Deut. 6.4; Lev. 19.18)*

We're so used to hearing the marrying of these verses in mutual interpretation that its radical innovation is easily lost on us. As far as we know, Jesus was the first person to link explicitly loving God with loving our neighbour – put simply, he is saying that, first and foremost, we

express our love of God through our love of human beings – and our willingness to do the latter is a measure of our devotion to the former.

Elsewhere, Jesus expands this radical spirituality further:

> *But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you. (Luke 6.27-30)*

For Jesus, the principal way we demonstrate our love of God is not by obeying rules and regulations or maintaining ritual purity or offering sacrifices or participating in communal living or seeking a martyr's death or even by pursuing moral renewal – as valuable as some of these can be. Rather, we love God by, in and through loving people.

Which begs the question, what does 'loving' mean in this context? New Testament scholar, John Meier concludes his magisterial study on Jesus' love commandment with these words:

> To love this 'neighbour' means to will good and do good to him, even if one feels some personal enmity toward him. More specifically, in the immediate context, loving one's fellow Israelite means promoting, protecting, and, if need be, restoring that person's rights, honour, status in the community … Jesus is commanding his disciples to will good and do good to their enemies, no matter how the disciples may feel about them, and no matter whether the enemies remain enemies despite the goodness shown to them. (*A Marginal Jew*, vol 4, pp 492 & 530)

Loving, in Jesus' teaching, is a wilful and practical undertaking towards another human being, in God's name. It is perhaps best summed up in another of Jesus' aphorisms, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7.12/Luke 6.31). The implications of this teaching are wide-ranging while the applications are various and extensive, but many relate, in one way or another, to justice. And here, Jesus follows in the footsteps of the great Hebrew prophets, the likes of Amos and Isaiah, Micah and Elijah.

For example, loving someone who is marginalised or oppressed might mean striving alongside them for their emancipation. Loving someone who is destitute might mean helping them access the resources they need to live with dignity and sufficiency. Loving someone who hates us or who seeks to do us harm might mean refusing to return hate with hate or to be dehumanised by their contempt.

Another biblical specialist, John Dominic Crossan, articulates the relationship between 'love' and 'justice' in this way:

> Justice is the body of love, love the soul of justice … When they are separated, we have a moral corpse. Justice without love is brutality. Love without justice is banality. (*God and Empire*, p 190)

Now I share all this with you today by way of both an explanation and an invitation. Lent will shortly be upon us, a liturgical season traditionally associated with discipline – discipline not as punishment, but as discipling, striving to become faithful, fruitful followers of Christ. As we have been reminded this morning, love is the essence of the Christan Way and justice is one of the channels through which it transforms the world.

It is for this reason that justice – in particular, embodiments of social justice – will demand our attention throughout Lent. Sunday sermons will introduce the weekly focus which, in the following days, will be explored through a network of small groups, meeting in person or online, using course materials prepared specifically for this purpose.

That's by way of explanation. Which only leaves me to extend an invitation to embrace this Lenten discipline so that as a community we can support one another as we seek to be faithful, fruitful followers of Christ through pursuing social justice for some of the most vulnerable members of society.

A good number have already enrolled for a Lent Group (it's free, by the way). As you will see from the sign-up sheets at the back, there are still spaces. If you can't find a slot that works for you, please let one of the clergy or church officers know. And if Lent Groups aren't your thing, why not use the course materials in your own way – they can all be found on the church website.

Together, let us grow in our understanding of what is characteristic about Jesus and what is his enduring legacy for us today.