

Readings for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

25th October 2026

First Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour. I am the Lord.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord."

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but, just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals but to please God, who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed, nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

Gospel: St Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

A Reflection for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

‘Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?’

We humans, or some of us at least, seem to have a fixation with the best, the greatest. In sport, we don’t have to look far for questions such as ‘Who is the greatest women’s tennis player of all time?’ Is it Serena Williams, or Martina Navratilova, or Billie Jean King, or someone else? Or who is the greatest men’s footballer of all time?’ Cristiano Ronaldo, or Lionel Messi, or Pele ...? This despite telling our children that is the taking part that matters, not the winning. But these are, by and large, unanswerable questions. Yes, we can compare the statistics of who has won what and how many times, but we can’t actually pit players of different eras against each other to put the question to the test.

In today’s Gospel passage, the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus with what they hope is an unanswerable question, and one that will discredit him however he answers. Earlier in the chapter, the Sadducees had been trying to do the same, first with the question on taxes that Anne spoke about last week, and then with the intentionally ridiculous story of the woman who married seven brothers successively, asking whose wife she would be at the resurrection. Now that the Sadducees have been silenced, the Pharisees step in.

Nowadays, we tend to think of ‘Pharisee’ as a derogatory term, not least because of what Jesus said in the Gospels about their hypocrisy. But, in Jesus’ time, the Pharisees were regarded as a group who took their faith seriously, who encouraged others to do the same by adherence to the Law and by regular participation in worship at the Temple and in the synagogues. Ironically, Jesus’ position was quite similar to theirs, encouraging faithfulness to God, and we know that he too regularly attended the Temple and synagogue. Yet, the Pharisees couldn’t see this. They knew that Jesus’ teaching was influential and that influence was increasing with the people. Jesus posed a threat to their own position as religious leaders and they wanted to remove that threat.

Their question, ‘Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?’, seems simple enough to us, on the face of it, particularly as we are so familiar with Jesus’ answer ... but there was plenty for him to consider. The five books of the Torah, the Jewish Law, contain no less than 613 individual commandments, 365 of them negative in form, ‘do not’, and 248 positive. I haven’t counted them personally of course, but I would feel more encouraged if the positive outnumbered the negative. Although he had 613 commandments to choose from, Jesus did not hesitate. The first part of his answer comes from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:5): ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (‘might’ not ‘mind’ is correct here). He combined this with a quotation that comes from today’s reading from the Book of Leviticus (19:18): ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ As Jesus concludes, everything else depends on these two commandments. All those other 611 (presumably) commandments fall into place if these two are followed.

With this answer, Jesus brings love of neighbour on a par with loving God, and draws attention to the need for love of self if we are to love our neighbour. Everything depends on love. The love referred to here is not simply sentimentality or emotion, it is beyond that. It is the love that Jesus gave his life for. The Greek word, *agape*, used here, is a self-giving love that is most concerned with others.

This *agape* love begins with God and God's love for us and for all of God's creation. We have considered before that 'neighbour' is far more than those immediately around us, or even all human beings, but encompasses all our non-human neighbours, everything that God has made.

Recognising God's love for us enables us to see ourselves as God sees us, which is the beginning of love of self. Love of self is, or should be, loving ourselves as God loves us. It's not a self-indulgent or selfish love; it is unconditional but also honest. God sees and loves us, warts and all, so we need to accept and love ourselves in the same way. It is loving ourselves in this way, knowing that we are loved by God, that empowers us to change for the better, to aspire to what God desires us to be.

And only when we love ourselves in this way can we truly love our neighbour as ourselves, in a way that is accepting, honest and encouraging. We see our neighbour as God sees them, and want the very best for them in a way that is unconditional and honest, but not indulgent. Unconditional love does not depend on likes or dislikes, mood, whether or not someone or something has annoyed us or let us down. God loves us despite these things and calls us to love ourselves and others in the same way.

It can be hard to be honest in love, both with ourselves and others. We may need to refuse requests and set boundaries. After all, we don't love our children by giving them everything they ask for – we know that is unlikely to be good for them in so many ways. But we also know that children grow up and, with loving support, learn to make better decisions for themselves - not perfect in all probability, but they learn to love themselves and others in a healthy way, God's way. So, such *agape* love requires realism, and it does not mean being a doormat. Love like this is still unconditional, it is not earned, but is something that God gives all of us, and wants us to have for ourselves and to give to others.

At times, such love entails forgiveness. It is the love that allowed Jesus, as he died on the Cross, to say of those who killed him, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do'. Forgiveness is powerful but it is often very difficult. Sometimes, where people have been terribly wronged, it is all but impossible, and we should have nothing but compassion for those who find themselves in that situation. Sometimes, the most difficult person to forgive is ourselves, but, if we find ourselves in that position, we need to have compassion on ourselves too, to see and love ourselves as God loves us.

Agape love, to love our neighbours as ourselves is a choice that we make as Christians, and it can be a hard choice at times. I remember a priest friend once telling me that she prayed to God to love her neighbour, especially if she was finding someone particularly hard to love. Or, if that was too much, she would pray that she would want to love them ... or if not now, then in the future ... or that she would at least behave as if she loved them...

Learning to love ourselves as God loves us, and learning to share that love with others is part of our Christian journey in learning to love God. The love that God has for you, for me, for all of his creation, is unconditional, accepting and honest; it is also patient, kind and will never fail. Choose to show that same love to yourself, to the others in your life, those whom you encounter, and to all of God's creation.