

A More Loving People

In her discussion of Matthew 23:34-36 KATHLEEN RUSHTON suggests COVID-19 is inviting us to live the commandments more fully.

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I was pondering this reflection when a woman handed me a leaflet and said: "The Bible tells us God will send pestilences." She continued with her the-Bible-says-it-is-true-views of coronavirus before getting off the bus.

That evening I began my annual retreat. I was offered Pope Francis's words about this time: "What we are living in now is a place of *metanoia* and we have the chance to begin. So let's not let it slip from us; let's move ahead."

Metanoia consists of *meta* (expand, go beyond) and *noia* (mind). We can stretch our minds by reflecting on the great commandments, in Matthew's Gospel, by drawing on the four marks of the church with Francis's leadership in the post-COVID-19 world as identified by Christopher Lamb.

Jesus enters Jerusalem in a way not expected of the Messiah – on a donkey. The "whole city was in turmoil: 'Who is this?'" (Mt 21:10). He cleanses the temple. Opposition mounts. A lawyer asks: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus replies: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

First Mark – Missionary Simplicity

The first commandment is to love God with one's whole heart, soul and strength (Deut 6:4-9). COVID-19 is forcing the Church to concentrate on its core message. What can we learn from these biblical parallel understandings for the whole of human existence (Deut 10:12-13; 30:10) for the first "mark" of missionary simplicity?

The heart (*kardia*) is the centre of human emotions. The soul or life (*psychē*) is the centre of consciousness and vitality. Strength (*ischys*) suggests power and might. Love, then, is an inward feeling of attachment along with outward behaviour.

Matthew, too, emphasises the whole person. "Heart" is at the centre of willing, thinking, deciding and doing (eg, Mt 5:8; 6:21). "Soul" or "life" (*psychē*) is not disembodied, other-worldly or dualistic. We have a choice. Our life or

daily existence is given over to God or something else (eg, Mt 2:20; 6:25). Mind (*dianoia*), used only here in Matthew, means thought, understanding or disposition.

We can reflect on our love for God, then, as a direction, a joyful disposition amidst difficulties, a whole way of life and action lived according to God's revelation in the words (Mt 7:24-27; 12:46-50) and actions (9:36) of Jesus. Our whole self, living each day, desires and is orientated towards God and participation in God's mission.

Second Mark – Focused on the Poor

The second "mark" of the emerging Church will be that, though it might be smaller, it will be more focused on the poor. The global economic crisis flowing from Lockdown means the Church, too, will be pruned of resources. Its history shows this offers new growth. Love of God is entwined with the second commandment, love of neighbour (Lev 19:18). Jesus also stresses their unity and coherence (Mt 5:17-19). Financial hardship greatly affects the poorest and those on the peripheries. This will make the social outreach of the Church even more crucial.

Many Christians incorrectly believe that Jews are to love only their own people. But Christians, too, can have this tendency. Importantly, "neighbour" does not affirm an exclusivist ethic. A universalistic moral attitude is found, for example, in the insistence that all humanity is created in the image of God (Gen 1:27; 5:1-2; 9:6). Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself." This does not mean just a few acts of love but a vision of a just society which is found repeatedly in Scripture.

The many requirements in Leviticus 19:1-17 are summed up in: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18). So, we cannot confine Jewish ethics to one verse and overlook all of Leviticus 19 where we also find: "The alien who resides among you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself" (19:34). And while Jesus

is concerned with Israel (Mt 10:5-6; 15:24), all nations are included (2:1-12; 8:28-34; 15:21-28; 27:54; 28:19-20).

The "yourself" in Leviticus 19:18 is not about self-love. Those Mediterranean people were group-orientated. They saw themselves not in individualistic terms but embedded in a family, clan or religious group. This instruction was given in the context of a *particular community* – for Jesus to his people or for Matthew to his community. That community is, also, "your neighbour".

The post-pandemic world invites us: to take responsibility for our faith; to a more active discipleship rather than being passive consumers; and to make spiritual sense of the COVID tragedy.

Maybe we can expand our vision by reflecting on a tendency to restrict "our neighbour" to people like us – those from our culture, race, creed, socio-economic group, gender or sexual orientation.

Third Mark – Natural World and Science

Arguably the intertwined love of God and neighbour is the focus of worship, spirituality and theology. The third "mark" of the Church in a post-COVID

world will extend this horizon to a renewed relationship with the natural world and science.

In closing buildings and suspending liturgies, Church leaders were responding to scientific advice. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis gives attention to insights of modern science. He reminds us that: "Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (para 66).

Fourth Mark – Liturgical and Pastoral Creativity

The fourth "mark" will be liturgical and pastoral creativity. With health restrictions, the Church is already finding new ways to proclaim the Gospel and bring the sacraments to the faithful. The post-pandemic world invites us: to take responsibility for our faith; to a more active discipleship rather than being passive consumers; and to make spiritual sense of the COVID tragedy.

Reflecting on the great commandments, I think of the words of the prophetic leader the late Cardinal Martini who offered this salient reminder: "Jesus asks: will the Son of Man, when he returns, find faith? He doesn't ask: will I find a great and well-organised Church?" 🙏

25 October
RL: 30th Sunday Ordinary Time
Matthew 22:34-40
RCL: 21 Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 22:34-46

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