

Dear friends

First of all, my apologies that my weekly email is coming to you rather later on Sunday than usual, and also that it does not have the regular link to a video worship and reflection. Instead, I am attaching the text of the sermon that I preached at Hurley and Kingsbury this morning, together with the newsletter. (See Newsletter page on website to download this). Normal service, I hope and trust, will resume next week!

We are coming up to the time of year when we would usually hold services that attract a full church. This is particularly so for our All Souls' Services of Commemoration of the Departed, and the Remembrance Sunday Parade Service at Kingsbury. As I'm sure you'll appreciate, we cannot accommodate those numbers in our buildings with the requirements for social distancing, and so things will be different this year. The All Souls' Services will go ahead, but will be by invitation only, and with seats to be reserved in advance. Although room in church is limited, there is no limit to the number of names that can be read in the services, so please let me know if there is somebody from your family that you would like to be commemorated. I am sorry not everybody who might wish to attend will be able to be present in person. However, I am sending out a booklet of prayers and reading for this time of remembrance, and you may wish to use that as you light a candle at home to remember those you love and see no longer. That booklet is attached, but I shall also be sending out printed copies. We shall also hold further services in church to remember our loved ones next year when the restrictions on gathering are lifted.

On Remembrance Sunday, I am intending to hold a short Act of Remembrance, to include the reading of names of the Kingsbury war dead and Two Minutes' Silence and laying of wreaths, outside in Kingsbury Churchyard. There is a fair amount of space for people to gather in household groups, but again there are prayers included in the booklet I am sending for those who will observe Remembrance Sunday at home. Some may wish to stand outside their home at 11am on that day, and/or on Wednesday 11 November, and keep the Two Minutes' Silence that way. Obviously, these plans are subject to the existing rules still being in place next weekend, without any further lockdown announcements. We do what we can!

This week sees our Annual Parochial Church Meetings for the three parishes in the group, and I look forward to seeing some of you at one of those meetings. It is a legal requirement that they take place, and anybody on the church electoral roll is entitled to attend. However, I recognise that this year some will prefer not to, and the meetings will be as short and simple as possible. I look forward to being able to hold more extensive meetings next year, when we can have fuller discussion and reflection on where we are going as a group of parishes.

With my prayers and blessings

John

Revd Dr John White

Priest in Charge of Kingsbury, Baxterley with Hurley and Wood End and Merevale with Bentley
The Vicarage, Church Lane, Kingsbury, Tamworth B78 2LR
01827 874252

Last Sunday after Trinity

Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22.34-end

‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest 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.’

It would be nice if I could say that the reason this week’s reflection begins with the same words with which I ended last week’s reflection was all part of some clever and careful design. But it’s not; or at least not one of my making. Truth be told, last Sunday I had not even looked at this week’s readings, and was focused solely on Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question about paying taxes to Rome. ‘Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’.

And what is it that we owe to God? Nothing less than our whole selves, body and soul, all our best powers of mind and strength.

This week, the Pharisees appear again, with another question designed to test Jesus. This time, the trap is not so obvious. The question seems innocuous, and a perfectly reasonable one for religious leaders and teachers to discuss among themselves. “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

What is perhaps most remarkable about Jesus’ answer is that it is not remarkable at all. It is not even original. Jesus does not need to coin some clever witticism, or turn the question back on those who asked it. He simply tells his hearers the age old answer, in words they would have heard in scripture a thousand times; “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.”

Sometimes, we don’t need to make things complicated. The key to how we are to live our lives really is as simple as that. Love God. Love one another.

Simple, but not easy. It is precisely in the all-encompassing nature of those commands that the challenge lies. If we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, then there is no part of ourselves which is exempt. It is our whole self that belongs to God, not just one part of our being that we can label as “religious” or “spiritual”. Every dimension of our being and of our lives is to be devoted to God, in its entirety.

It challenges a common misunderstanding of that other saying about rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. We cannot divide our lives into sections, some of which fall under purely worldly governance, and then a separate portion that falls to God. It has sometimes been said, “If Jesus is not Lord of all, then he is not Lord at all”. We are to love God in every aspect of our lives, with every part of our being.

What that doesn't mean is that if all our love is given to God there is none left over for anyone else. Hence the importance of the second part of Jesus' summary of the law: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Although in St Matthew's Gospel it is described as a "second commandment", it is not something separate from the first, so much as a clarification of the implications of the first. As we read in the first letter of St John, 'Those who say, "I love God", and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.' And that love is not primarily a matter of words or of feelings, but of action. Again, from St John, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"

Love God. Love your neighbour. It is simple, but it is not easy. We live in strange and surprising times. A few months ago, I don't think many people would have expected that the most compelling and authentic moral leadership in this country would come not from the church, not from government or opposition, but from a young Premiership footballer. Marcus Rashford's campaign to ensure that children from families facing food poverty do not go hungry during school holidays has been truly remarkable, and has put parliament to shame. I have no doubt that Marcus Rashford would far rather concentrate on football than politics, but his intervention is not party political, even if it inevitably impacts on that sphere. It simply stems from that basic principle: "How, in the love of God, can you have the world's goods and refuse to help a brother, a sister, a neighbour in need?"

Of course, the working out of that principle gets us into muddy waters. There is room, and need, for politicians to address the issues of how best to remedy the underlying long-term issues of poverty and inequality, and to determine the most effective action. But in the meantime, people, children, are going hungry, and we cannot, we must not look away.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself." It really is as simple as that. Simple; but no one said it would be easy.