

Matthew 22.34-end

This well-known gospel reading took me back two years to a lovely moment around 6.30am in the morning on 25 May 2018. I had just arrived with my friend Sarah at Bole airport in Addis Ababa. We had to arrange our Ethiopian entry visa and were immediately ushered into a small office. The three men who greeted us asked us where we were from. As we replied, they smiled broadly. 'We want to ask you,' one of them said, '...did you enjoy the wedding?' They were, of course, referring to the wedding of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle, which had taken place the weekend before. We felt so welcome. Because the wedding had been broadcast around the world, we had shared a common experience and the airport officials spoke as if it were a wedding of people we knew intimately! They wanted to rejoice with us.

If you paid careful attention to the sermon at Harry and Meghan's wedding, you may already have realised why that association sprung to mind. The preacher was Bishop Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the US Episcopal Church. And he preached on just this text. He spoke about being inspired by the way that Jesus loved: 'That's what love is. Love is not selfish and self-centred. Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives, and it can change this world.' Do read the sermon again. You can find it easily on the internet.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' his reply seemed very straightforward. He quoted from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind,' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Then he added, 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

These verses are so familiar to us that we need to remind ourselves how provocative Jesus was being. His earlier challenge in the Sermon on the Mount was that the heart should be renewed: it was not just outward action that was important. Our love for God needs to find expression in the way that we love the people around us, particularly through compassionate and practical actions that make a real difference to their lives.

What Jesus says here about loving God and loving one another needs to be set within the larger gospel picture of Jesus dying for the sins of the whole world and rising again with the message of new life. Then we can see the commandments, not as orders that we try to obey but as an invitation to a new way of life in which love can become a reality. **Amen**