

Greetings,

I hope you are all keeping well.

Rather than jumping straight into the reflection I thought I would ask a quick question. Do you remember being taught to pray or the first prayer you learnt? Before continuing take a few moments to think about and reflect on the prayer you learnt or about what you were told to do when you prayed.

When I was eighteen, I preached at a church's youth service. After the sermon Arthur, an elderly man who had been a local preacher, came up and started to lead us in the Lord's Prayer. It hadn't been planned and was rather unexpected especially as he skipped parts of it and muddled it up. I didn't think anything of it at the time, so I just let him get on with it. Then a few months later in a circuit service this Arthur stood up at the end of the sermon and went to thank the minister before leading the congregation in the Lord's prayer. Again, he got the lines confused and skipped parts, however the minister was able to help lead him through it properly. It turns out he had started to do this regularly in the services he attended ever since he had stopped preaching. The reason why he had stopped preaching and the reason he was getting confused and muddled when he tried to lead the Lord's Prayer was because he was suffering from dementia. What sticks in my mind wasn't that Arthur would muddle or get parts of the prayer wrong. It was that he kept praying and trying to lead people in prayer; his faith in God and prayer were such an integral part of him that not even dementia could strip him of it. What I found even better was the church's response, which was to allow him to continue to lead the prayer. All the ministers knew him and would help him lead it when he came up and when a new local preacher or new minister came to the church they would explain the situation and just ask them to help him through the prayer. This story to me demonstrates what the passage for this week is all about. The passage is Matthew 22:34-40:

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup>and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup>"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" <sup>37</sup>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.' <sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."  
(All scriptures are taken from the NRSV translation.)

At the start I asked the question, do you remember being taught to pray or the first prayer you learnt? The reason I asked this was because Jesus's response to being asked what the greatest commandment was to start by quoting from the Shema. The Shema is the first prayer that a Jewish person normally learns, and it is integral to the Jewish faith, as it is to the Christian faith. It's found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. However, it is far more than a prayer; it is a way of life - they are to live out what it means to love God with all heart, soul and mind.

“<sup>6</sup> Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem<sup>[b]</sup> on your forehead, <sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Psalm 1 again reiterates the importance of the Shema not just being a prayer but a way of life,

“<sup>1</sup> Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; <sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.”

It continues espousing the benefits of a life lived according to the law of God and the consequences of not doing so. For Jesus though this was just the starting point. He continued by adding on to it from Leviticus 19:15-18. In doing so Jesus reveals what was at the heart of his teaching and ministry and creates a new creed for his disciples and all who would follow to live by. Love God and love others.

In the story I shared at the start I said that I believed it showed what this passage is about. In Arthur I believe I saw a man whose identity was shaped by his faith and his love of God. As a local preacher he would have opened the scriptures to people and shared his understanding and interpretation. He would have also led people in worship through song and prayer. This was how his love of God and others was expressed and when he became ill and as his dementia got worse that love of God was expressed through his worship in prayer, even when he could not remember the lines. The church he was part of reciprocated this same love. It would have been so easy for them to stop him coming forward to share, but they did not - instead they encouraged and supported him and in doing so showed what it means to love your neighbour as yourself.

Lord I want to love you, with all my heart, mind and strength, I offer you my heart as a place to dwell, come and fill me with your Holy Spirit,

When I am strong, I worship you with all my might and when that strength wanes and I become weak I offer the strength I have left,

May You Lord Jesus be imprinted on my mind, so that my whole life and way of being speaks of Your love. Even though my mind may fade through age or illness my identity and all that I am will be centred on You.

Teach me to love as You have loved, take all that I have offered to you and show me how to use it to encourage and support others, so that I may love my neighbour as I love myself and live according to your ways, Amen