

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 25 October 2020

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit so that our souls may live with joy by your Word. Amen.

Matthew 22:34-46

Love the Lord God with one's whole self

'**You** shall love the Lord **your** God with all **your** heart, and with all **your** soul, and with all **your** mind'¹ is the greatest and first commandment.' We may have heard about this commandment – say, at least hundreds of times. May we not? Whenever we hear this commandment, what comes to our minds first? ...One of the things maybe something like this: to love God with one's whole self, we may have to know who God is first. But then God is Spirit, how do we know this God? Who is this God? It also reminds us of this question: 'Who is my neighbour? (Luke 10:29).' The question was asked by a lawyer to Jesus about the second commandment – 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' In both questions, two things are in common: one is that **one's whole self is involved in loving God** and in loving one's neighbour. The other is that the word 'love (ἀγαπάω).' We will explore the word 'love (ἀγαπάω)' first and then what involves in loving God with one's whole self.

The word 'love' (ἀγαπάω/ Ἀγάπη) in this passage is not just an ordinary word. In Greek, there are four words that mean 'love.' *Phileō* (Φιλέω) is a companionable love such as friendship; *Agapē* or *Agapaō* (Ἀγάπη or Ἀγαπάω) is not kindled by the merit or worth of its object, but it originates in God; *Storgē* (Στοργή) is a natural affection or natural obligation such as the love of parents to their children; *Eros* (Ἔρος) is erotic love.

Agape (Ἀγάπη) doesn't belong to us but to God. So we often say that God is love. Take one example which can show us both – a personal, intimate relationship with God together with love - agape. When the resurrected Jesus met Peter by the Sea of Tiberias in John 21:15-17, Jesus asked Peter if he loves (ἀγαπάω) him not only once, but three times. For two times Jesus used the word *Agapaō*. And Peter answers him that he loves - *phileō* (φιλέω) Jesus for both questions. In the end, Jesus asks Peter if he loves (φιλεῖς) Jesus for the third time, and Peter answers him as so. Like any other disciples, Peter has had a personal intimate relationship with Jesus. But as he answered, he has loved Jesus in terms of *phileō* (φιλέω), not *Agapaō* (ἀγαπάω). Why is it so important? At some stage, the relationship was in crisis when Peter denied Jesus for three times. When Peter denied Jesus for the third time, at that very moment, it reads, "while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly"² There was no exchange of words between Jesus and Peter, but only this dreadful look that made Peter remember the word of the Lord. Now Peter meets the risen Lord and he is asking if Peter loves (ἀγαπάω) him, and he replies with the word *phileō* (φιλέω).

Peter's case simply illustrates our inability to love (ἀγαπάω) our God unless this love (ἀγάπη) is given to us. Why does God give such a commandment even though God knows that we are not able to fulfil? Yet scripture says that we are able to love (ἀγαπάω) God in and through Jesus Christ. The special relationship with Jesus as in the vine and its branches in John 15 enables us to love God with our whole self. When we abide in Jesus, it is regarded that we have kept the first commandment as Jesus abides in God's love.³ If so, what is to love the Lord God with one's whole self?

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

² Luke 22:60b -62

In the first commandment – ‘to love the Lord *your* God with all *your* heart, and with all *your* soul, and with all *your* mind,’⁴ we need to pay attention to this singular possessive determiner ‘your (σου).’ A few things can be thought of: first, Jesus was answering to the question of the lawyer as an individual, so Jesus used a singular pronoun ‘you,’ or ‘your.’ Also, to love God, like any other love relationship, involves a very intimate personal relationship with God. Similar to human love relationship, this love relationship between God and us is often depicted as a relationship of husband and wife, or bridegroom and bride. In this case, of course, God is the bridegroom or husband, and we – God’s children or Israel back then, are wife or the bride. As we read Hebrew scripture, this love relationship is quite unbalanced. It seems that God is always calling Israel to repent and come back to Him. God is the one who is waiting and yearning for this love back. As such God is the Lord of all love through His infinite patience and waiting and faithfulness. God is the one who always believes in this love. What this Lord of love does is to bring all back to Him including those who have left from this love. In doing so, God wants us to be in the eternal rest in God’s presence. This eternal rest is called sabbath – שָׁבַת as in Genesis 2:3, which reads, “So God blessed the seventh day and hallwed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

As such the word ‘the Lord (κύριος)’ seems to have quite a different concept of lord from common sense. In the New Testament, ‘the Lord’ (κύριος) is a translation of Hebrew word tetragrammaton– *YHWH*.⁵ Throughout Hebrew scripture, what this Lord or God had been doing is to call His unfaithful bride Israel time and time again by sending prophets, wars, natural disasters to name a few. When we hear a word ‘lord’ in the present context, we may imagine someone who holds power to make people live or die and who can even force us to do something we may not wish to do. But in this case, this Lord seems suffering from our ignorance and our unfaithfulness to this love – *agapē* of God. Matthew’s passage informs that when we abide in Jesus’ love, we also confess that Jesus is Lord (κύριος), and God raised him from the dead.⁶ This faith in Christ transforms who we are, and it also brings the change of the lordship from one’s self to God. Simply put it, we are supposed to live the life of Jesus. In doing so, we are keeping the first commandment – ***Love the Lord God with the whole self!***

In the present, it seems even challenging to understand the first commandment, especially when it comes to the lordship of one’s self. In schools, communities and everywhere, we are told to live and realize one’s self by becoming one’s own lord. But scripture says that we are created according to the image of God, and we are supposed to live in this image which is revealed on the cross. In this pluralistic world, keeping the first commandment seems obsolete by the sceptic. But then we can ask a few questions to the sceptic. When we remove the image of God from our lives, what images would we bear? If we deny the life of Jesus who is the invisible image of God,⁷ what references do we have to prove our very existence here and now? Why do we bother to keep the natural environment sustainable, to help the weak, to heal the sick, to release the captive, more importantly to love one another for what reasons? The first commandment informs that we bear the image of God. That’s why we are able to acknowledge God as the source of our being and reasons to love things that God loves. May God help us live in this commandment – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,’ today and always. Amen.

³ John 15:9-10: Jesus also said, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.’

⁴ Ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτῷ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου (you) ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ σου καὶ ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ διανοίᾳ σου

⁵ Tetragrammaton:(Yahweh/Jehovah) Hebrew name of God. BuW this word was/is never spoken by Israel people since it was/is the name of God. Instead, they read *Adonai Edonai elohim*.’

⁶ Romans 10:9

⁷ Colossians 1:15 - The Supremacy of Christ: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;