

Who God is and how to love God

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 23 October 2005)

Exodus 34:1-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Our two readings from Exodus and Matthew contain some of the most important things that the Bible has to tell us about God. The first passage is the culmination of God's revelation of himself to Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. After God has given the ten commandments, after the people have rejected God and given their devotion to the golden calf instead, after God has forgiven them, then God replaces the stone tablets that Moses had broken, the tablets with the ten commandments written on them, and then God comes to Moses and makes sure, if you like, that after all this Moses really does know who God is, who this God who has chosen Israel for his people really is. If Israel is to know this God who is now their God, if Israel is to be devoted to this God and no other, then there must be no vagueness or confusion about the identity of God.

So God identifies himself - in two ways. First, there is his name. There's an important point here about the translation of our Bibles that I should explain if you don't already know this. If you look at this passage in most English translations of the OT you'll find that the name of God is given as 'the LORD' - with the word Lord written in capital letters. That's the conventional way of representing the Hebrew name of God. It's not really a translation, it's a kind of substitute for the name itself. And Bible translations use it because this is a practice that was already being followed by the Jewish people in the time of Jesus and the New Testament. They treated the divine name as too sacred to pronounce. They didn't want God's name to be bandied about like any Tom-Dick-or-Harry name. This is the name that names who God is. And so, when they read the scriptures, they didn't say the name, they substituted the word 'Lord.' And our translations have followed that practice, so that wherever you find LORD in capital letters in the OT, it stands for the Hebrew name of God. Where it's not in capital letters, it doesn't.

I follow that Jewish practice of not saying the divine name itself, because it was followed by Jesus and the early Christians, and I don't see why we should change that. It's also offensive to Jews to bandy the divine name around in the way that some Christian biblical scholars do. So I avoid that.

But it is a name, and that's very important. The God of Israel has a name, a personal name, a name that stands for his identity, the way our names stand for our identities. What Richard Bauckham means is me, me and no other person. If you use my name it's because you're wanting to distinguish me from any other person you might be talking about or anyone who might be confused with me. It identifies who I uniquely am. So with the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. This God is not some general divine principle or idea, not some vague divinity that we can portray in any way we choose, not a deity we can adapt to our needs or wishes as we choose. This God has a unique identity which he makes known to us so that we can know him.

In the NT this God acquires a new name because he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. I said, as preachers often do, before I started this sermon, 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' God's trinitarian name. It's short for 'God the Father of Jesus Christ, God the Son Jesus Christ, and God the Spirit of Jesus Christ.' It means: God as we know him in Jesus Christ. In a sense it's God's new identity, but it is not new in the sense of superseding the old. God hasn't discarded his Hebrew name. God is still the LORD in that special sense.

So to Moses God proclaims his name and the other thing he does in this passage is to reveal his character. Here we have the great OT character description of God – to which the OT refers back to again and again, and to which the NT also refers back on at least one very significant occasion that I'll mention in a moment. We know who God is because this is the sort of God he is, this is the way he relates to us and deals with us. He says:

The LORD, the LORD, [insisting on his unique name]
 a God merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger,
 and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
 keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation,
 forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
 yet by no means clearing the guilty...

What does that character description say about God? Notice it's all about the way God relates to his people. God is recognizably this God because this is the way he deals with us. He's a God who cares passionately about his people and gets involved with them. He cares passionately that they be the best that it's possible for them to be. And so he loves us and he's very patient with us. He forgives. He puts up with the ways that we keep going wrong - the way Israel had with the golden calf only days before this. He is patient and forgiving, but that doesn't mean that he tolerates our sin in the way an over-indulgent parent might, the sort who in the end doesn't really care how their child behaves and how they turn out. That sort of indulgence is a function of not really caring. God cares passionately that we be the sort of people he has made us to be. And so he doesn't ignore sin. He doesn't behave as though it doesn't matter. The guilty are guilty. But God is always ready to forgive. He doesn't give up on his people.

I said there's an important reference to this passage in the NT, and it comes near the beginning of John's Gospel, where John is describing what happens when God becomes human in the person of Jesus Christ. (John 1:14): 'the Word (of God) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth...' That last phrase, 'full of grace and truth,' comes from Exodus 34. It's a shorthand reference to that character description of God in Exodus. Exodus says 'abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' - John translates that: 'full of grace and truth.' So what it means is that the character of the God of Israel is to be seen in the human life of Jesus Christ. The same God, the same character, but now in a sense he can be seen (as Moses was not able to see) in the person, the character, the life of Jesus.

So God has both a personal name and a personal character. We know who God is. So how in that case must we respond to God? Let's turn to our Gospel reading, which is

the passage in which Jesus selects from the law the two great commandments. You'll be very familiar with this because in fact we read it at every Communion service. One of the Pharisees, a professional teacher of the law of Moses, asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment among all the commandments that God gave Israel through Moses. It's the sort of question that Jewish teachers in Jesus' time discussed. The law of Moses contains hundreds of commandments. So which are the really important ones? Is there one that sums up all the others? Is there one that sums up for us what the whole law is really all about?

So Jesus picks out two commandments from the law of Moses, one from Deuteronomy, one from Leviticus. Notice that Jesus did not of course invent these two commandments. I think it's quite a common misconception that Jesus was the first person to teach people to love their neighbour. Not at all, it's back there in Leviticus, it's part of what the God of Israel required of his people. Jesus just draws our attention to it.

The first commandment Jesus picks out is the command to 'love the Lord your God ('Lord' there stands for that Hebrew personal name of God, that's the God we are to love) ... to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' In Jesus' time good observant Jews recited that commandment daily in their daily prayers. They were even more familiar with it than we are. The second commandment Jesus picks out he says is like it - because it's also a command to love - 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Everything else in the OT, says Jesus, hangs on those two commandments. At the end of the day, they're what it's all about.

I'm reflecting this morning mainly on the first, the command to love God with all we are and have. But notice how different this is from the command to love our neighbours. We are to love our neighbours like ourselves, or, as Jesus says elsewhere, do to them as we would wish them to do to us. But it's only God who is to be loved with our whole being. I wonder how many ordinary secular people nowadays would imagine religion as like that. Not as something we religious people pay some attention to alongside other concerns in our lives, but as the devoting of everything we are and have and do to God. But if God is God, that must be the only appropriate way of relating to God.

To love God with our whole being means on, the one hand, that some things are excluded from our lives - anything inconsistent or competing with love of God. But, on the other hand, it means that all the good and proper concerns of human life are included within the love of God. Not just, for example, preaching this sermon is the kind of thing I should do for the love of God, but also getting a good sleep last night, eating my breakfast, enjoying the walk to church - the love of God includes all these things, when we are truly devoting all we are and have and do to God. On some other occasion, losing sleep or missing breakfast might be what the love of God requires of me. To live for God means I should be alert to those possibilities. But it's only because loving God is a big enough notion to include all the proper concerns and activities of our human life that we can love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. In a sense we should do all those things for God's sake. That doesn't take any of the value of those things out of them. Quite the opposite: everything becomes entirely what it should be when it is devoted to God.

Because God is God, the God of all things and all people, the God who cares for all things and all people, giving ourselves wholly to God is the way to be truly human. But giving ourselves wholly to anything other than God debases and distorts human life, because nothing less than God can fulfill us as the creatures God has made us. To devote oneself to something less than God is idolatry. All sorts of good things that are good parts of human life when they take their place within the love of God, ordered by the love of God, become destructive if we try to live for them. Football is a good thing in its place, but to make it the overriding concern in your life, subordinating everything else to it, would be to impoverish your life and distort it. Even wonderfully good causes - say you devote your life to researching a cure for cancer: if it really dominates your life completely so that nothing that doesn't contribute to it is of any concern to you - that would make even such a good cause into an idol and into something that spoils human life. God is the only thing big enough to deserve our total devotion.

That's why we can't just collapse the first commandment into the second. We can't just say that we love God by loving our neighbour. We do love God by loving our neighbour, but that's not all of it. *Even* loving our neighbour isn't big enough to encompass everything in our lives. It can and should encompass a great deal. But not all. For example, when I enjoy something truly beautiful I have a kind of experience that is quite important in human life. It's not a way of loving my neighbour, but it can become part of my loving of God with my whole self.

So the love of God is the only love that truly can and should include all the other concerns of life. Including them in our love for God both enhances them and also keeps them in their place, stopping them taking over and becoming idols. And finally loving God with our whole selves gives a unity to our lives that nothing else can give. Without God our lives are collections of fragments. We are blown this way and that by all kinds of different concerns, interests, demands on us. Is there anything that can weld all these things together into a life, a project, a meaningful whole? Only the love of God.

I've said that loving God can include everything else in our lives. So it's not that when I'm doing my shopping I'm not loving God. But, if our lives are to be lived for love of God, then there must be times that we set aside solely for God. Only by worship and prayer in which we learn to love God above all other things can we also learn how to love all those other things properly, for God's sake.