

LOVING THE LORD

Deuteronomy 6:1-12

This morning we're looking at the most important of all the commandments – Loving the Lord – mainly from the perspective of our reading from Deuteronomy chapter 6 which you can find on page [***] of the church Bibles and all the verses I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

The first three verses of our reading form an introduction to Moses's address:

“These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.” (verses 1-3)

The "commands, decrees and laws" of verse 1 refers to the whole of the covenant law. The Law which God had already commanded Moses to teach the Israelites to follow and to observe in the Promised Land which God was going to give them (Deuteronomy 5:31). The objective of this teaching of the Law was that the Israelites might have continual fear or reverence for Yahweh. The evidence of this reverence would be seen in their obedience to God's Law. Verse 2 tells us that the fruit of this obedience would be long life, not long life in the sense of living to an old age, but rather blessed and abundant life. Also this promise was not necessarily for the Israelites as individuals, but rather speaks of abundant life in and possession of the Promised Land as a nation for many generations.

This Promised land was to be a rich land. Deuteronomy tells us many times that it would be a *land flowing with milk and honey* (11:9; 26:9,

15; 27:3; 31:20) and the same expression is used in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Similar phrases occur in ancient Egyptian literature (Tale of Sinuhe) and Canaanite texts from Ras Shamra. It's a phrase which powerfully illustrates the richness and completeness of God's blessing, especially for a nomadic people – which the Israelites were at this time. Milk is a product of agriculture, a product deriving from human labour, whilst honey is a product of nature and together they speak of the completeness of God's blessing. This richness would have been greatly emphasised when contrasted with the deprivations the Israelites suffered in their many years of wandering through a desert wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

Moses then moves on to proclaim the first and most important commandment the Israelites are to obey in verses 4 and 5:
“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (verses 4-5)

This is the beginning of the Jewish *Shema* (set out in verses 4-9), so called from the Hebrew word translated "hear". The *shema* contains the fundamental truth of Israel's religion and the fundamental duties which are founded on that fundamental truth. For Jewish Rabbis the *shema* was the heart of the Law. Indeed, to the present time observant Jews recite the *shema* at least twice a day. The *shema* is the expression of all God's person and purposes in sixteen words of Hebrew text. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment he cited this as the first and most important commandment (Matthew 22:34-39; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28).

Moses begins "Hear O Israel" or focus your attention and heed the really important teaching I'm going to give you. In Hebrew, to "hear" in this context is tantamount to obedience. To hear God without putting his commands into effect is not to hear him at all. Let's all remember that in our own lives. The singular form of the verb emphasises the nature of Israel as one covenantal chosen people, although their plurality is also emphasised in the following expression "our God". Verse 4 continues 'Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one' as Jewish Bible scholar C H Gordon puts it.

So, verse 4 emphasises the fundamental truth that God is one and that he was the God that the Israelites could call *our* God. The Israelites had discovered the uniqueness of their God as he led them out of Egypt in the Exodus. Yahweh is completely unique, the one and only God. He's not just first amongst gods, he is the only true God.

Let me just say at this point that the statement that 'God is one' does not in any way conflict with our concept of the Trinity. The Hebrew word used here (*Echad*) describes a compound or collective unity (it's used of a man and woman becoming one flesh in Genesis 2:24), whereas Hebrew has a different word (*Yachad*) for a mathematical or numerical unity.

Verse 5 gives the fundamental duty which is the response of love that God requires from man. This command is central to the whole book of Deuteronomy. Old Testament scholar E. W. Nicholson says: "it is in a very real sense true to say that the entire book is a commentary on the command which stands at its beginning: 'You shall love the Lord your God ...' " The command to love is central because the whole book is concerned with the renewing of the covenant with God. Although this renewal demanded obedience, that obedience would be possible only when it was a response of love to the God who had brought the people out of Egypt and was leading them into the Promised Land. The language of love speaks both of the treaties between nations in that time and place (which used love language as part of the treaty obligations). It also speaks of the analogy of the father/son relationship between God and man which had already been employed in Deuteronomy.

The command to love was based on the precedent of God's love. God's love had already been shown to the Israelites principally in the Exodus, and, in a larger context, in their election as God's chosen people and in their earlier calling from the time of Abraham. The people were called upon to love God with their whole beings—*with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*. This all-encompassing love for God was to find its expression in a willing

and joyful obedience to the commandments of God, and this theme is developed in the next four verses. In covenant terms, love is not so much emotional or sensual in meaning (although that kind of meaning isn't excluded), but the love is in the nature of an obligation - it's to be cultivated, we need to show loyalty. As the apostle John said "This is love for God, to obey his commands" (1 John 5:13). To put it another way, to love is to act lovingly. Thus, because of who and what Yahweh is in regard to his people whom he elected and redeemed, the Lord rightly demands unqualified obedience from his people.

The depth and breadth of that expectation is elaborated upon by the fact that it encompasses the heart, soul, and strength of God's people, here viewed collectively as a covenant partner. The "heart" (Hebrew *lēb*) is our intellect or rational mind. For the Israelites the heart was not the seat of emotion, but the seat of the intellect and rational understanding. The "soul" (Hebrew *nepeš*) is our being or essential person. The strength (Hebrew *mē'ōd*) is the physical side of our nature. So Israel was to love God very, very much with the totality of its being. As we've already seen Jesus affirmed this as the first and greatest commandment. Indeed I believe he quoted it at least twice, after the Sadducees denial of the resurrection (Matthew and Mark) and in response to the lawyers question about inheriting eternal life (Luke).

This commandment is first and greatest because it is a commentary on the very first of the Ten Commandments—"You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut 5:7). This affirmation of the uniqueness and exclusiveness of Yahweh as Israel's Sovereign and Saviour finds full endorsement and explication in the *Shema*; because to recognize Yahweh's unity and uniqueness, and to respond to that confession with total obedience, is the strongest possible way of demonstrating adherence to the first commandment.

This commandment is first and most important because it encapsulates all of God's saving intentions and provisions. To love God as it commands is to place oneself within the orbit of his saving grace, because the *Shema*, the heart and core of the Old Testament

Law was, as Paul said, to be “put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24).

The Israelites were to think and meditate on these commandments, look at verse 6:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.” (verse 6)

As we've already seen, for the Israelites, the heart was not the seat of emotion, but the seat of the intellect and rational understanding. Thus the meaning of this verse is that the Israelites response should not just be rote obedience, but should be based on real understanding.

Having understood the commandments themselves they were then responsible for their children, look at verse 7:

“Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (verse 7)

the Israelites were to discuss God's commandments both inside and outside the home. Here the text speaks of impressing the commandments on their children like a stonemason carving an image into rock. The contrasting language of activity and inactivity means that the commandments were to penetrate and be a part of every aspect of their lives. You know, these are practices we should all follow today.

The important role the commandments were to have continues to be emphasised in verses 8 and 9:

“Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.” (verses 8-9)

It's not completely clear here whether God meant them to follow these instructions literally, or whether this was just another way of emphasising the importance of the commandments. Although I believe the context implies that the instruction was figurative rather than literal. In fact, the Israelites did come to follow these instructions literally, affixing a number of Bible verses (Exodus 13:1–10; 13:11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; and Deuteronomy 11:13–21) to

their arms and foreheads in a small container called a *phylactery*. They also affixed the same Bible verses to their doorposts and gates in a container known as a *mezuzah*. In any event, whether we take these instructions literally or metaphorically, the important thing is that individuals (verse 8), their homes and communities (verse 9) were to be distinguished in their character by obedience to the commandments as a response of love to and for God.

Our reading then moves on to instructions concerning the Promised Land, which was a real physical manifestation of God's abundant blessing upon the Israelites, and verses 10 and 11 tell us that that blessing was now imminent. But, our reading finishes with a warning in verse 12:

“be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (verse 12)

This verse speaks of the danger which would be facing the Israelites as they settled in the rich material blessings of the Promised Land. As we now know they did indeed succumb to the temptation to forget Yahweh and suffered the punishment of exile from the Promised Land for their disobedience. They didn't have to love God and obey his other commandments in order to gain the Promised Land, but they did need to obey them in order to keep it. Aren't we often tempted to forget our God when we're enjoying rich material blessings.

Today we have far more reason to obey the first and greatest commandment – to Love the Lord with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength than had the ancient Israelites. God has given us far more than a physical Promised Land in Canaan. He has blessed us unbelievably abundantly. He sent his son Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross at Calvary so that our sins might be forgiven and we might be reconciled to God and welcomed as his children, not into dwellings on this earth, but into eternal dwellings in God's kingdom where we shall be with him throughout eternity. We are not subject to the Sinai covenant which God made with the Israelites, we are now beneficiaries of the new covenant in Christ's blood. God had blessed the Israelites by rescuing them from slavery in Egypt and undertaking to bless them in the Promised Land before they were commanded to

respond in love for God, but God has loved us and blessed us far more through the new covenant in Christ whilst we were still sinners, and so we have even more reason to love God. As the apostle John said: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10 NIV)

Because of God's love and graciousness in establishing the new covenant in Christ's blood, we should respond to God in Love. We should love him with all our heart and soul and strength, not because we must obey that first and greatest commandment in order to gain eternal life – we don't need to do that, God has already given us the gift of eternal life in his enormous grace and mercy. All we have to do to gain eternal life is to turn to Christ in faith acknowledging him as our Lord and master and believing in his death and resurrection – and if you've never done that I urge to you to do it right here right now today. It's so important you mustn't put it off to another day.

No, we don't love God to gain any reward or to avoid any punishment, rather we should respond to God in love out of gratitude and appreciation for what God has already given us – the incredible blessing of eternal life. For, while we were still sinners, God sent his son to die for us on the cross so that through his sacrifice, through his blood, our sins might be forgiven. What grace and mercy. What amazing grace! Grace so amazing that our only response can be to love God with the entirety of our beings – with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father we thank you for your amazing grace that you sent your son Jesus Christ to die for us whilst we were still sinners. In response to that grace we turn to you in love this morning and indeed each and every morning – loving you with all our minds and with all our souls and with all our strength. Amen.