



October 25th

THE NEW SHOFAR

Love God with the fullness of who we are

Take the lead on initiating love

Law, Justice and Righteousness

One way of speaking of the laws and provisions of the Hebrew Covenant with God is by using the word for justice – *mishphatim*. The section of Exodus in which these *mishphatim* are found is called the Book of the Covenant. The section in which today's reading is found is all about living in community, the way we deal with others. They contain social, ethical, moral and religious prescriptions. For the Hebrew people, these are more than moral guidelines. They are irrefutable, irreplaceable commandments from God. They come with all of the authority of Heaven behind them. But, as is the way with God, it in the pursuit of obedience we find the grace needed to live Covenanted lives.

In a world where truth has become variable, a fact of life now defined by the individual person and group to which they belong, these magisterial and authoritative *mishphatim* offer certainty and stability. This includes the commandment to love.

Loving God is impossible without love for others – all of them

God is love. That is not meant to be a description of a quality associated with God. It is about the way God acts. It is meant to be a verb, or an adverb. God is *love in action*. God is *loving*. Always. Everyone. As children made in the image and likeness of God, we too are able to love. It is built into our DNA and unless we are *loving* as God *loves*, we are far from being the people God created us to be. This is why God gave us the Commandments – to enable us to live as we were created to be living.

Which is the greatest commandment?

Matthew is responding situations that arose in Judaism after the 70 A.D. destruction of the Temple by the Romans. For the Rabbis, the difficulty was how they could love God when they had no Temple, no means of sacrificing on the altar and no priesthood. We know from the Book of the Covenant in Exodus how the nation was brought together around obedience to the will of God. In those *mishphatim*, there were laws outlining the proper way to be living and these included detailed instructions regarding worship. Now none of them were possible. If sacrificing is the way to love and serve God, the way to seek the forgiveness of sins and the way ensure divine grace, then are the Jews now lost?

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

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Given at this point in history, the Christian community would have been seen as a sect of Judaism, it was a question of some importance for Christ's disciples as well.

There was a passionate debate among the Rabbis at the time over which command was the greatest. They understood how there were 613 laws given by God – 365 prohibitions and 248 positive injunctions. The Pharisees here are not asking about the greatest in the sense of most important. What they were asking is whether or not there is a single law that encapsulated all 613 laws. Is there one embracing all others?

The comprehensive commandment – with all of the authority of God

For Matthew's Jesus, the message is clear. Love-ing is the way we fulfil our responsibilities as Disciples of Christ. Sacrifice will not do it. Nor will simply obeying the letter of the Law. Our responsibilities are only fulfilled when we love God and love our neighbour with the same life-embracing intensity. John's first letter makes the meaning of this teaching unambiguously clear...*Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen (4:20).*

This love-ing was so comprehensive and obvious, the people in Antioch commented on it – *see how they love one another*. It is the way of obedience that brings the Good News to the world...*by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love, one for another (John 13:35)*. Why do we love others? Because God first loved us.

Why did the Pharisees have troubles with the teachings of Jesus?

The leaders of Judaism in Jerusalem found Jesus to be a threat to their own positions and status in the wider community. They come to Him with malicious intent. There is no listening here, just a determination to force the Lord's intentions to fall in line with their own. They are right. Everyone else is wrong. They see it as their right to be the only conduits for God's saving love. They want to control God and decide right and wrong.

Jesus, on the other hand, engages people with *caritas*. In biblical terms *caritas* is offering the means for union with God. Putting someone in touch with God. This is a beautiful way of understanding what Jesus is saying. While it is the word from which our English word *charity* is derived, it involves much more than charity. The great Latin Hymn *Ubi Caritas* says it all. *Where charity and love are found – God is there.*

Charity is the other side of Love, and what Jesus insists on is a challenging Truth: Love which is not outflowing is not love. This is the nature of God – outflowing love. It is the way of living to which we are called in Christ Jesus. It is world transforming. Imagine if all Christians lived this to the full...*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*. This is the way we put people in touch with God – by loving them.

And here is a further challenging part of what Jesus is saying. We are to initiate the love-ing of others, even our enemies. That is what God is doing all the time around us.

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