

Hymns:     4     “Father in heaven”  
              “Father God in heaven”  
              “the great love of God”  
          345    “‘And can it be that I should gain”

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Readings:   Exodus 24:12-18  
              Mark 12:28-34

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## ***“THE TWO COMMANDMENTS OF JESUS”***

In the last month, Margret and I have travelled both East and West. To Haiti first, 72% west of London, five hours behind us, where Christopher Columbus, who “discovered” the island in 1492, was buried just over a decade later. And then to Kerala, near the southernmost tip of India, 76% east of London, five and a half hours ahead of us. Two days ago, in Kochi (Kerala) we found ourselves looking at the place where they buried Vasco da Gama, who “discovered” these parts in 1502. To twist the words of Rudyard Kipling, grandson of a former minister of this church, “East is East and West is West and we now know that the twain can meet.” I’ll come back to that.

Again and again, when I’m away and expected to preach a sermon, I find myself turning to an old favourite. “I’m the minister of Wesley’s Chapel in London,” I say, “it’s the Mother Church of Methodists around the world. In fact, I like to think of this splendid 18<sup>th</sup> century edifice, built by one London’s most famous architects, as a sermon in stone. It offers care and teaching to its members, it reaches deep into its community, and it’s a platform from which to address the city, the nation and, indeed, the world. And if you can think of it as a sermon, you should know that this is a sermon that has a text. You can see the text painted on the wall of the apse behind the pulpit. Every preacher standing in John Wesley’s pulpit speaks with these words standing in judgement on his/her efforts. And every man, woman or child receiving bread and wine at the communion rail, who hears the words ‘the body of Christ’, ‘the blood of Christ’, does so under those same boards. Everything in this Chapel has to address the two commandments of Jesus. This is our text. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy spirit. And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’”

That’s how I begin. I’ve been doing so for over twenty years. Surely, with just a few months to go, I can just keep going with this rich theme. No need to change now. But I confess that I’m finding it more and more difficult to do so.

First of all, there’s the fact that I’ve become more and more unhappy about the incompleteness of Jesus’ reply to the young scribe. You remember that the question he put was a simple one: “Which commandment is the first of all?” To which Jesus replied not with two commandments but with one. “The Lord thy God is one.” That’s the first of the ten commandments and it’s the first, the very first, in the mind of Jesus too. What

we call “the two commandments of Jesus” are actually a spelling out of this one, simple, overarching commandment that reminds us that we are the children one God, one God and one only God, the maker of heaven and earth. Once we confess our allegiance to this one God then, the proof of our confession of faith will be measured by the love we offer him – from heart, soul, mind and strength – our utmost for his highest. And also by the love we show our neighbour. “How can we say we love God whom we don’t see if we don’t love our neighbour whom we do see?”

OK, OK, we see the point. But why are you at such pains to tell us all this now. For the simple reason that we need to be sure about this one-ness of God in these days when we live so closely with members of other religions. Jews and Moslems are mystified by our claim to worship a God who is three-in-one. So too, incidentally, are quite a few Christians. We must find a contemporary way of dealing with our Trinitarian beliefs and deal seriously with the accusation from other quarters that we are polytheists, or at least tri-theists, who worship not one but three “gods.”

Well, fair enough. But we’ve heard you express these ideas before. You’re just back from these exotic journeys. Why bring them up now. We’d rather hear how you got on in India than listen to you thumping the same old drum.

Well, I’ve received a further challenge to what I thought was a simple and lovely passage of scripture. Exactly a week ago, at this very time, I was about to preach the final sermon of this year’s Maramon (Marathon) Convention in Kerala. I’d chosen this passage to preach from and I’d had to give a complete transcript ahead of my preaching it to the man who would have to translate it into the Malayalam language. I’d been up since the dawn writing it. He came to me half an hour before the service began and there was something clearly worrying him. He came clean.

“It’s all very well you preaching about the words of Jesus,” he said, “but you can’t really deal with them as if they stand alone.” He then went on to explain that, just as important as the words which Jesus used to reply to the young lawyer, was the situation which gave rise to that exchange in the first place. The lawyer belonged to a very conservative religious group in Jewish society, a group absolutely determined to maintain a Jewish identity whilst the people were living under Roman law. So Jews simply had to keep to the requirements of their own law and make whatever accommodation with the Romans they possibly could. The job of these scribes was to scrutinise the way their fellow Jews were keeping the law and their attention must sometimes have been resented by the people. They could sometimes have felt that Big Brother was watching, that they were living in resembled a Thought Police state. Indeed, it might even have seemed as if religion was being used to create some kind of alternative society. And this is what was worrying the priest who was about to be my interpreter. He was anxious that the commandments of Jesus should be contextualised, that the “dialectic” between Jesus and his interrogator should be spelled out. I saw his point at once and, with his permission (indeed, with his encouragement), I was able to point to the way religion has been used again and again to coerce people, to constrain them, to manipulate them towards an end desired by others. My Keralan brother was particularly concerned about the way the relatively new Indian Prime Minister was perceived to be using a very conservative version of the Hindu religion right now to achieve his own political ends. “Fascism” is a word being used in India by his critics. I was able to set this Indian fear alongside so many other similar examples from recent times. The role of religion in

Germany and Spain in the 1930s and Northern Ireland during the troubles came readily to mind.

All of this has made me think deeply about the way we too readily cherry pick the nice parts of our Bible and pay scant regard to context, social circumstance, extraneous pressures and the like. I'm grateful to my Indian colleague for helping me see this point.

Religion comes in many forms in Kerala. 40% of the people are Hindus, 30% are Muslim and about 25% Christian. In those circumstances it's vital that Christians have some kind of idea about how to express their beliefs. I have found this to be a very rich experience indeed. The Hindu "hands-together-for-prayer" greeting was matched evenly by the "right-hand-on-the-left- breast-above-the- heart" greeting and the simple "handshake (or either of the above) greeting" of Christians. The people have lived in perfect amity across these religions – we had Hindus and Moslems at all our meetings and I certainly enjoyed conversations within families where different faiths readily co-exist. The fear these days is that the politicisation of Hinduism by the Delhi government and the up-tightness of Moslems as they defend themselves against the forces of Islamophobia around the world will destroy this unity which is the product of centuries. Hence the concerns of my interpreter.

We found yet another co-existence in Kerala which was heartening. We've all heard negative tales about Communism – the manipulation of the masses, the incitement to revolution, the birth of dictators from Stalin to our own day, and so on. In 1957, when India was divided into States and Regions, the State of Kerala produced the first democratically elected Communist government in the world. Reason for fear. Pause whilst a shudder goes down our spines. In more recent times they've shared government with other parties. But they've by no means gone away. The result? Kerala is the only State in India with a 100% literacy rate (and it's enjoyed this for over half a century). Higher education is available to everyone, boys and girls. And workers' rights are protected. Communism with a very human face.

And then there's Capitalism. We've all heard negative tales on this front too. Thomas Piketty's recent magnificent study *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* shows how two centuries of capitalism have produced haves and have-nots with the gap between them getting ineluctably wider and wider. Only two world wars have changed those trends. And we all know how the banking sector brought about the 2008 economic crash and, equally, how ordinary people have been forced to pay for their folly. Reason for fear. Pause for a shudder to travel the length of our spine. But in Kerala we saw something really cheerful on this front too. Tata, one of the world's largest industrial/commercial conglomerates (who hold British Steel on a string) are the owners of the tea plantations we visited a few days ago. Their environmental policies, their provision for their workforce, and the magnificent support they give to people with mental and physical disabilities is truly wondrous. People who might have had to live with despair are given hope. We met two badly disfigured people working on a project set up by the plantation owners, two people who got married. They are key workers on the project and have now produced two children, both of them perfectly formed and full of life.

Communism with a human face. Capitalism with a human face. Hinduism with a human face. Islam with a human face. And, pray God, Christianity with a human face. All our faiths, philosophies, ideologies must have a human face. We Methodists, of all people,

should embrace this fact with some warmth. John Wesley's sermon "A Caution against Bigotry" can be brought forward for consideration. "We must aim," Wesley said, "to be the friends of all and the enemies of none." And he went on to argue, with some passion, that we should be delighted to work with anyone of any school of thought, religious or otherwise, who desires the same ends as we do. All that needed to be clear was that our work and witness sought to express our love for God (however we name God) and love our neighbour. That's the cardinal test for those peddling their own quack remedies, quick fixes, quirky ideas at the moment. I've been shocked by the refusal to let a school teacher, a British citizen, accompany his children on a goodwill visit to the United States. And I've been horrified to read of the Indian engineer who was murdered by a white fanatic shouting "Get out of my country: go home." These are difficult days for all of us. To my mind, Populism and Isolationism stand little chance of showing people how to love God or, indeed, any definition of the neighbour other than the purely local and domestic definition. At the end of the day we will all be measured by our ability to recognize a force higher than ourselves and an ability to see the needs of all those we meet and with whom we have dealings to serve each other's needs and, thereby, to build communities and, indeed, a world together, a world and communities fit for our children and our children's children to live in.

May the good Lord help us to see all this.

Before it's too late.

Amen.