



# *Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 25 October 2020

### READINGS

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12; Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; Matthew 22: 34-46

## *Love that transforms*

There are moments when something so momentous, so life-changing, happens that you realize nothing will ever be the same again. Often, we don't comprehend at that very moment, but you know something important is happening, and later it strikes your mind that it was a transformative moment in your life. At his inauguration speech, at the Union Buildings, 1994, when Nelson Mandela uttered these words: "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another." There was a hush in the crowds that gathered there, a recognition of something profound happening.

We can think of poignant moments in the history of this country when milestones were achieved and we knew in our hearts of hearts that something great was happening. The winning of the first Rugby World Cup Tournament in 1995. The announcement of South Africa winning the bid for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in 2004 and many other moments. But there are momentous and life-changing occasions in our personal lives where we get to know that something transformative was occurring and nothing would ever be the same again. Sometimes these transformative moments happen in the face of trial and tribulation.

In his final days, Jesus faced many tests by the chief priests and the elders of the temple, by the Sadducees, and by the Pharisees. They were meant to discredit him; they were meant to make him condemn himself by answering trick questions inappropriately. These leaders of the faith knew how to set a trap for a young prophet and how to execute it. They knew how to find fault and how to show the faithful Jews how insignificant the accused was.

Our Gospel passage this Sunday presents another one of those transformative and life-changing moments: When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment.

And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(Matthew 22:34-46)

Imagine the deafening silence that followed. They were all were astounded and they could not accuse him nor could they answer back because these words were at the very heart of the Jewish faith and they knew it. There was a deep sense that something profound was happening and that nothing was ever going to be the same again.

Jesus' words established that the history of the Jews, the basis of the Jewish faith, the traditions and beliefs from the time of Moses and the prophets, served to remind everyone of what was expected of them by their heavenly Father. Love God, love your neighbour and love yourself! A moment that was highly charged with tension and betrayal, was turned into something beautiful, something eternal, and something full of grace and truth.

Jesus' response to the Jewish teachers reveals the relational nature of love: loving God, loving others and loving oneself. The lesson here is that these cannot be separated, but are interdependent and support one another. Loving God is about loving the world that God created. When we love God, all of our other different types of love are put in their proper perspective. Loving God turns us toward our neighbour and their her or his physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. It also turns us toward the non-human world, because that too is an expression of God's love to humanity.

Loving our neighbour brings beauty to God's experience of the world: in a very real way, we love the Creator by loving the creatures. In Luther's language, our opening to God's grace enables this grace to flow to our neighbour, and for us to become little Christs committed to the well-being of neighbours and strangers. **What is the nature of this love?**

One of the foremost spiritual and theological authors, Frederick Buechner expressed the love of neighbour in this way:

"In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbours, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as well produce a cozy emotional feeling as you can a cough or sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbours in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our well-being to that end."

It is a tall order!

In the letter to Thessalonians, Paul speaks of "pleasing God" rather than human beings. His words suggest that when we love God and let our love for God determine our behaviour and values, everything else falls into place. In Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians, his devotion to God is clearly displayed. He demonstrates that In going beyond his own ego, he is doing something beautiful for God, something that will endure from generation to generation.

Therefore, in pleasing God, we help create a world that reflects God's values: we enable God to be more active in our lives and in the world. The passage concludes with the apostle speaking of sharing ourselves, that is, making our lives a gift to others, making our mission a contribution to the beauty of the earth, giving and receiving love in every encounter, and healing the world one moment at a time.

**So what is it that we are commanded to do?** Ultimately, we are called to love ourselves as much as God loves us, and to love others with the same spirit that God loves them. To stand with Jesus as he stood before the faith leaders of his time and to look critically at our world:

To weep with those who weep.

To laugh with those who laugh.

To touch the untouchables, feed the hungry, welcome the children, release the captives, forgive the sinners, confront the oppressors, comfort the oppressed, wash each other's feet, hold each other close, and tell each other the truth. In the words of St Augustine of Hippo – we are to actively search for the good in others. That is why after being convicted by the Spirit of God and Jesus of Nazareth, nothing can ever be the same again for those who are His followers.

**Almighty God,**

**Your Son has shown us how to love one another:**

**let our love for you overflow into joyful service**

**and be a healing witness to our neighbours;**

**through Jesus Christ our Lord'**

**who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,**

**One God, now and ever**

**Amen**