

Today's reading from Paul is from the first of Paul's six letters and is the oldest piece of Christian literature that we have.

Thessalonians is a congregation that Paul had a great deal of affection for, because in literary terms this is a personal letter.

So, what was going on? What is the context of this letter?

Paul, it seems, from the evidence of Acts, had a very successful ministry preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica. Paul's preaching was so successful, that a riot broke out and as a result of the success and the riot, Paul and Silvanus were expelled from Thessalonica. It would seem that the Jews at Thessalonica were not ready to enhance their belief with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The passage we read this morning is not as profound as that earliest confession of Christ crucified and risen, it is though Paul's confession of his faith to those whom he is close to at Thessalonica.

He reflects on the difference between his preaching and teaching and those who have a large dose of self interest integrated with their preaching. Paul reflects that openness and honesty are required from one who follows God through Jesus Christ. He also reflects that his faithfulness has resulted in his being imprisoned and mistreated. And it is this suffering that sets him apart from those, I assume pagans, but perhaps they were other Jewish preachers, who preach for profit.

Paul in the final part of this morning's reading, compares himself to those gifted manipulators, as a nurse who is gentle, who cherishes his listeners as if they were his own children, sharing not only his words, but his very self. That's an encouragement if ever there was one.

I was struck immediately by the comparison Paul makes between himself and a nurse cherishing her children. We find this again in Romans immediately following a passage in which he greets ten women and seventeen men. Now I mention this because it shows the

equality with which Paul viewed women. And I think this idea of a nurse, in those days a servant, again speaks and underlines the idea of the equality of everyone in the Christian community.

But back to the main theme, not only does Paul present a contrast between himself and the other preachers, who apparently preach more for self grandioseness than for belief, but Paul also presents a softer gentler Paul than we are used to thinking of. This morning's Gospel reading also contrasts what might be regarded as normal, with what the faithful expect.

And now to the Gospel. Jesus' statement on the greatest commandment is probably the best-known and most-discussed passage in all of Scripture. Placed in its Mediterranean cultural context, it takes on a fresh and concrete meaning.

The setting is another of those endless discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees. It's a game of who knows most and who can interpret and argue the best.

On the face of it, the question appears very honest. The Pharisees identified 613 commandments in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Two hundred forty-eight were positive ("thou shalt") and three hundred sixty-five were negative ("thou shalt not"). How could anyone remember all of them? Were some more important than others?

(Some of you may remember that after the Haulocust another the 614<sup>th</sup> was added and it is neither "thou shalt not" or thou "shalt" it is simply "never again".)

Some teachers distinguished between "heavy" and "light" commandments. The "Ten" (e.g., honor thy father and mother) are examples of heavy or serious commandments. An example of a light or less serious commandment is Deuteronomy 22:6-7, which stipulates that a person who finds a bird's nest with a mother sitting on eggs or with young may take the young but must let the mother

go. The reason for observing both is "that it may go well with you, and that you may live long" (Deut 5:16; 22:7).

Another custom was to sum up the Torah's commandments in a small number of precepts or a summary statement. King David in Psalm 15 proposed eleven, Isaiah thought six would do it (33:15), Micah had three in mind (6:8), and Amos only one (5:4).

But as Jesus sat and debated with the Pharisees he combined two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (citing and amending Deut 6:5). And the second of equal importance is "love your neighbor as yourself" (citing Lev 19:18).

Jesus does not discard the other commandments, but he does bring a lesser known commandment into the spotlight. And he accentuates the place of these two commandments – saying "On these two commandments hang *all* the law and the prophets."

But essentially, this answer is very orthodox, very traditional.

If there is any difference between orthodox Jewish understanding of the commandments and Jesus' explanation, then the difference is in the understanding of who or what a neighbor might be.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we find in Luke's version of this commandment (Luke 10:29-33) Jesus expands the idea of "neighbor" to include ideas of those whom we traditionally mistrust and don't like. For example Jews did not and do not

associate with Samaritans. But Matthew does not expand on whom the neighbour might be, so we understand that in this version of the Great commandment, Jesus sticks with the traditional idea of the neighbour being a brother, that is, fellow Israelite in the way that the commandment stipulates in Leviticus.

But what might be meant by the word love? What cultural implications are there for "love" in Jesus' time?

We know from anthropology that the society of Jesus time revolved or was centred around the group. For example, the group might be family, or village, or neighborhood, or perhaps factions like the Twelve, or the Pharisees. At any one time a person might be a member of a number of these groups, but the important point here is that there was no sense of individual decision making in the way we understand and practise it.

The group gave a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, and advice for actions to be taken or avoided. The group was an external conscience exerting enormous pressure on its individual members.

In this context, love and hate are best understood as group inclusion and group exclusion. Whether emotion or affection is involved is beside the point. The major feeling in love and hate is a feeling of belonging or not belonging, respectively.

So, to love God with all one's heart is to be totally attached to God. To love one's neighbor as one's self is to be as totally attached to people in one's neighborhood or immediate circle of friends (i.e., fellow Israelites) as one is to one's family group. This has been and continues to be the normal way of life in the Mediterranean world, unless feuding develops.

To "hate one's father, mother," and others as Luke's Jesus (14:26) requires of his followers means to detach oneself from family and join the Jesus group.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says the greatest of the three virtues faith, hope, and love, is love; that is, love or attachment to the group.

The group-attachment aspect of love poses a challenge to us, individualistically oriented, sometimes emotional New Zealand believers. Which commandment would we say is the greatest? And what does that mean?