

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 9: 11-14 Mark 12: 28-34

SERMON

Jesus says "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength - and - you shall love your neighbour as yourself" The Scribe's responds: "You are right teacher.... this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"

Then Jesus recognises the wisdom of the scribe and says to him, and says what he says to no other teacher of the law, to no other scribe: "You are not far from the kingdom of God"

What interesting words these are... You are not far from the kingdom of God.

What interesting words - when applied to a scribe - when applied to a member of a class of people that so often are portrayed negatively in the gospels. - we have been taught that they were more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit; more concerned with observance than with the motivation behind observance.

It just goes to show that there is wisdom in the law of God and that those who study it - who find the truth within it; - the truth that love is more important than sacrifice and that mercy is more important than burnt offerings, are close to the kingdom of God.

We are not far from the Kingdom of God if we really try to do what is right and believe that God is One and that God is Good - and that to love him and our neighbour as ourselves is what God's will for us is all about.

You are not far from the Kingdom of God. Good words to hear from the teacher who bears the Kingdom within his very being and radiates the light of that kingdom for all to see.

Yet - yet in the words "not far" - it is possible also to hear that "there is some distance yet to go", that we are on the right track - but we have not yet arrived.

In a park in Europe, so I have been told, next to a beautiful flower bed, there is a sign, written in three languages:

In German the sign says: Picking flowers is prohibited.

In English: Please do not pick the flowers.

In French: Those who love flowers will not pick them.

It seems to me that in this sign lies part of the key as to what distinctions of distance we might read into Jesus' statement: "You are not far from the kingdom of God".

What is our motivation for doing God's will, obeying God's commands? Fear of authority? A desire for God's approval? The approval of others? Or love? What in fact does it mean "to love God"? What does it mean "to love our neighbours as ourselves?"

Did the scribe in today's reading lack a little something in his passion and in his understanding of the law of God? Was there a little bit too much duty and routine in his life of obedience and not quite enough eagerness and passion? A bit too much holiness - of being apart from the world - and not quite the right amount of compassion and of empathy?

Whatever it is - if there is anything - that implies a sense of distance between the scribe and the Kingdom of God -- in a most profound sense it does not matter; it is enough most surely for him, and for us, to hear the words "you are not far from the kingdom of God".

If you are sincere - if you who believe and try to do what is right; If you love as God wants you to love – you are not far from the kingdom of God.

A story:

A thoughtful, curious young man went to the desert to visit an elderly man, a monk, who had lived in the desert for many years. Arriving at the holy man's cave, the young man encountered the monk, who was sitting out enjoying the sun, his dog lying lazily at his side.

This spiritual seeker asked, "Why is it, teacher, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?"

The old man smiled and replied, "Let me tell you a story. One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large, white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon other dogs ran barking across the creeks, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit. In that story, young man, is the answer to your question.

The young man sat in confused silence. Finally, he said, "Teacher, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for God?"

"You fail to understand," answered the old hermit, "because you failed to ask the obvious question. The question is, why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? And the answer to that question is that the other dogs had not seen the rabbit. They were attracted by the barking of my dog. But once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase. Seeing the rabbit, and not following the commotion, is what keeps me in the desert."

"Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength - and - you shall love your neighbour as yourself"

You shall love. Shall love?? How can we not love? How can we who have seen the white rabbit do anything else but chase after it! And how can we who have only heard the commotion and smelled the scent not avoid the temptation of giving up the chase?

Sincere and deep commitment to the commands of God, to the command to love - versus the eager desire to return the affection and the love that we have experienced from God - to God and to what God has made. There is a distinction here. But it is not one to become anxious about unless you are about to give up chasing the rabbit.

When Jesus speaks to the scribe and affirms his wisdom and his insight, and tells him that he is very near to the kingdom of God, he is talking to all of us who strive to follow in the way of God, to all who seek to walk by God's light and to do good rather than evil.

He is telling us such people draw close to the kingdom of God even when they do not use the name that we here in this church use - even when they do not name the name of Jesus - and even when they do not understand the fullness of God's mercy for them in Jesus.

But how much better to have seen the rabbit; how much better to allow God's love for us in Christ to penetrate our hearts and to well up from inside us.

I urge you today as you consider the greatest of all the commandments and as you think about the words of Jesus to the scribe "you are not far from the kingdom of God"; I urge you to not hear those commandments as if God's love for you depended on your fulfilling them but rather to hear what a wonderful place you have come to in your pursuit of righteousness and how much more wonderful it will be as your love grows ever more perfect through the Spirit that is alive in you.

God loves you and God calls you to draw close to him so that you may know the fullness of his love. In the strength of that love - love as deeply and as passionately and as truly as did Jesus.