

Aotearoa Sunday 23 November 2008 Ian Bourne

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9, Colossians 1: 3-14 Mark 4: 26-34

Love God and your neighbour

I wonder if you have ever heard of a phylactery?

You may have seen pictures of one on the forehead of a devout Orthodox Jewish man. They are still sometimes worn by male Orthodox Jews. A phylactery –the word comes from a Greek word meaning a fortress- a phylactery is a small leather box, about the size of a match box, which some devout Jewish men wear on their foreheads, and another on their left arm. Inside the box is a small piece of paper, and on the piece of paper is written some words of our Old Testament reading today from Deuteronomy 6.

The words are, 'The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.'

The phylactery on the forehead and arm is a literal compliance with the instruction of the next verse, 'Recite them to your children, talk about them when you are at home and when you are away', (and when you go to bed and get up in the morning), 'bind them on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the door of your home.'

What a wonderful way to remind a Jewish believer that this could be the most important verse in the Hebrew Bible! Well, Jesus certainly thought it was very important, and in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 10, we read that when a teacher of the Law asked Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus challenged him, "What is written in the Law?" and commended him for his answer, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind (which is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6.5, then the lawyer added "and your neighbour as yourself." Jesus said, "You have given the right answer: do this and you will live."

We are to love God with heart, soul, might and mind. Our Christian faith is about our heart –where our love lies; and about our soul -the inner being which is the eternal part of us; and our strength –our faith must not be an unimportant part of our life, it needs to be embraced with all our might or strength; and it must include others -our neighbour.

When Jesus was speaking to that expert in the Jewish Law, who asked him about inheriting eternal life, it is quite likely that, as a devout Jew, the lawyer was wearing a phylactery, which Jesus knew contained a parchment with those words from Deuteronomy 6 on it. It was as if Jesus was endorsing the lawyer's faith in the God of Israel when he quoted those precious words which he wore on his forehead. But there is no record that Jesus made any actual reference to that phylactery. And he certainly did not say that his disciples should wear one, too. But he did endorse the lawyer's addition of the words

'with all your mind', implying that our faith needs to be an intelligent faith, reasoned out by our mind, as well as a faith that would benefit, not only ourselves, but our neighbour as much.

Some of the ideas and words of the Old Testament reading and Jesus' endorsement of those words are taken up in our Epistle reading today. Paul began his letter to the Christians in Colossae with an account of his own prayers. He tells them what he prays for when he thinks of them. In his prayers he thanks God for their committed faith in Christ Jesus and the hope that sustains them. Paul tells them more about his prayers for these Colossians. He prays that they will be 'filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding'. Remember that phrase added by the lawyer, 'with all your mind'. Jesus knew how important it is to have spiritual wisdom and understanding. And further on in this letter to the Galatians Paul urges his readers to 'clothe yourselves with compassion, meekness and patience' and 'towards outsiders, let your speech be always gracious. Different words, but in the same spirit as loving 'your neighbour as yourself'.

Today's Gospel reading was two short parables that Jesus told about the Kingdom of God. There are two things about a kingdom I want to mention. First, there is a King. Being a Christian means acknowledging that it is God, not any human being, who is supreme. As we have seen in the recent election in our own country, human leaders emerge for a time, then they become displaced and new leaders take over. But God continues as Lord of all. Sadly, when human beings become too powerful and try to rule the world there seems to be endless wars, mindless violence and unbridled greed. Magabe in Zimbabwe is an example right now, and Adolph Hitler's warped mind seventy five years ago did the same. Our Christian faith acknowledges that God our Creator is a King who wants the best for all his subjects.

Secondly, a kingdom is made up of people. When that lawyer quoted Deuteronomy 6 with its injunction to love God with heart, soul and strength, he added 'and your neighbour as yourself'. Jesus commended his words. This is part of the seed of the Gospel: human beings learning to live together and to care for each other. This is the seed which needs to be sown in every human heart and can bring forth a harvest of peace and plenty for all. And on Aotearoa Sunday let us apply this to our own country as Maori and Pakeha and, more recently, other ethnic communities share our land.

Jesus' other parable in today's Gospel is about the smallness of the mustard seed which can produce a result far greater than we ever expected. In the Christian Year, today has a three-fold significance. It is the last Sunday in the Christian Year. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday, and we begin the annual countdown towards Christmas.

In the old Book of Common Prayer the collect for the Sunday next before Advent began with the words, 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.' In A New Zealand Prayer Book the words are slightly updated. The whole collect goes, 'Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful

people, that richly bearing the fruit of good works, they may be richly rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.' One of the parables in today's Gospel speaks of the harvest that can come from the seed of the Gospel. As the collect puts it, 'the fruit of good works'. Those words 'stir up' have become applied to the very domestic task of stirring the ingredients for the Christmas cake, and the folk at St Philip's have invited us all to participate in that very thing today. But even more importantly, let us also stir up our Christian conscience and allow the seed of the Gospel to grow in our hearts to bring forth those good works that can be both a satisfaction to ourselves and a blessing to others.

And finally, today is Aotearoa Sunday, when we give thanks for our beautiful and richly blessed country. Wouldn't it be marvellous if we could cultivate in our own land some of those characteristics of God's Kingdom! At the end of the service, when the children come back, we will sing 'God defend New Zealand', our national song. It was written by the Irish immigrant Thomas Bracken, whose family went to Australia in 1856, then moved to New Zealand in 1869, and settled in Dunedin, when Thomas was 13 years old. He worked as a journalist for several Dunedin papers. He was a bit of a poet and in 1878 he wrote what he called the New Zealand Hymn, God defend New Zealand. He also wrote and published a book of poems called 'Musings in Maoriland' which was not a financial success. He took up politics, first in local government, then, for a short period was MP for Dunedin. On one occasion he caused a stir in Parliament by, not quoting, but singing, one of the Irish playwright and poet, Thomas Moore's songs to make some political point.

There is a Maori version of what was originally a five verse hymn. Unfortunately we do not have copies of the Maori version, but even if we did, most of us would not know what the words meant. There are some fine sentiments in the Maori version, such as a prayer that: 'May all our sins, we pray, be forgiven' and 'Let envy and dissention be dispelled' and the last Maori verse translates 'Let goodness always persevere, and absolute straight dealing prevail and abide in God's people'. I don't know who the author of the Maori version was, but some of those sentiments are very appropriate as we think about our homeland on this Aotearoa Sunday.