

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, was asked by one of her students, 'when did civilisation begin?' The student expected the answer to be with the creation of some earthenware pot, or the discovery of fishhooks or the use of stones to grind flour. But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur – that is a thighbone - that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You can't run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

Mead said 'A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts.'

However, it is possible to be civilised, in the sense of being compassionate without necessarily loving God. There are plenty of examples of good, caring, loving people and organisations that are completely without any religious motivation. But is it possible to love God and to be uncaring, uncompassionate and unloving towards others? I don't think so; our words of belief

and our words of prayer must have an outlet. This is the point Jesus makes as he defines the Greatest Commandment.

In the gospel reading before us today, Jesus is asked a question by the Pharisees. Now, the Pharisees want to trip Jesus up and they go for the jugular: 'What is the greatest commandment?' The Pharisees know the right answer of course, they just want to know if Jesus knows the right answer. And he does. He gives the answer that is the one and only answer in the eyes of the Pharisees. Known as the Shema, Jesus quotes from this prayer that is said throughout the day by devoted Jews. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.'

The Shema is named from the Hebrew translation of the first word of the prayer: 'Hear'...the word means hear, listen, pay attention to. It begins with the declaration that there is one Lord who must be followed, loved and obeyed. In quoting from the Shema, Jesus puts himself in the orthodox camp. It aligns him with all those who are very suspicious about Jesus; they think that he, Jesus, is setting himself up as equal with God, identifying himself as being God, attributing tasks to himself that only God can do...such as forgiving sins, healing people and

raising the dead. Indeed blasphemy is the final accusation that nails Jesus to the cross.

But Jesus agrees that there is one God, one Lord. He never sets himself up as distinctly separate from God or at odds with the God of the Hebrews, his claim is more profound: he is at one with this Lord. Later, Jesus asks a question of the Pharisees: 'whose son do you think the Messiah is?' Their answer is biblical, but it's not the full story. They think that the Messiah will be the son of David and although Jesus is of that lineage, he claims a more profound lineage: that of being the Son of God. Jesus distances himself from the more aggressive and militant model of David; he emphasises his oneness with the God of love.

Hear O Israel...listen, pay attention to this command that is the greatest: you shall love the Lord your God with all your hearts, all your soul, all your mind. Not only that, all the commands, and by the reckoning of the Pharisees, that numbers not just 10, but more than 600, these must add up to loving our neighbours and loving ourselves.

As we continue to adjust and acclimatise to the new regime of life lived with and around the Covid virus, we too must listen, hear and pay attention. We are

commanded to love. But, thankfully, we do not love from our own resources. We are given a promise. The verbs used in Jesus' words, and in the original Hebrew, are full of both command and promise. You must, you shall, you will

Where we fail, and of course we do fail both to love God and to love our neighbour and ourselves; we can look forward to a growth in this department of love. How that growth happens is through prayer and devotion, but also of action.

The poet, Malcolm Guite, hears the wind in the trees and likens that to our hearing the voice of Christ in rivers and seas, in forests and thunderclouds....his prayer is that Christ's voice, when we hear it, will:

*...stir[s] our sleeping conscience and recall[s]
Us to the love we had abandoned, lead[s]
Us through the parting mists of doubt, or fall[s]
Upon us like a revelation, plead[s]
With us upon the poor's behalf, ...and bleed[s]
Out from compassion's wounds....,*

Christ's voice, if we listen for it, can awaken our sleeping faith, recall us to our first love, and dispel doubt. Christ's voice, if we pay attention to it, awakens us to the voices of the poor and the

wounded. As the Covid restrictions continue, we have many more opportunities to pray to God, to change and to be changed by God as we come before him with our hearts, souls and minds...not just with our words....which we get so used to repeating. We are so missing the singing of our hymns but have we thought that this may be a unique opportunity to listen to the words of those hymns in a fresh way and to pray the words more deeply? Words like this:

O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come....
Our shelter from the stormy blast/our guide while troubles last
our eternal home..
or these new words for many of us, set to a familiar tune:
Love is the force that no fear can destroy;
Love is the cure for the frightened and flawed:
Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
love is the will to be whole once again;
love is the trust of a friend on the road:
God is where love is, for love is of God.

And then as we hear those words of command and promise, we turn to our neighbours to stay with those who have fallen, to bind up their wounds, to carry people to safety and to tend those who journey

through recovery. As Margaret Mead said, 'helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts.' This turmoil in which we find ourselves may be a chance to re-set the dials on civilization. And I would add that we need to hear the call to be patient even with ourselves as we offer ourselves compassion and as we reach out to others for the support that we need.

Hearing, listening, paying attention to God's command and his promise will cause our love to be more fruitful, and we have this opportunity borne of the Covid pandemic both to contemplate God's commands and his promises, and to put our love into action. To conclude, here are the final lines of Malcolm Guite's poem, the outcome of hearing Christ voice and his call to love :

raises
Our spirits till we dance for joy
And gives us too, a voice to sing his praises.

Amen.