

Sunday 24th November 2024 - Loving God With All Our Mind

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Date: 24 November 2024

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] I guess today is a kind of in-between Sunday, really, in our church calendar. Coming as it does off the back of Remembrance Sunday a couple of weeks ago, and then last week at the cracking baptism of Charlie and Anise and Makayo and Naya Rose.

Well, next Sunday, the 1st of December, that marks the beginning of Advent, and we'll get the Advent candles out and so on as we, I know, not the four candles joke yet. That comes next week, all right.

But we'll get the Advent candles out next week as we prepare for all that Christmas and Jesus' birth will bring. So that means today is a bit of an in-between kind of Sunday for us.

And yet the in-between nature of today, I think it means, thinking and praying this one through, that it could well be a good time for us just to take a collective breath, if you like, and invite God to help us to reflect maybe where we're at in particular on our journey of learning as we follow Jesus, both as individuals and as a church.

So I guess the question is, where are we at in our learning? And if you've been with us for a while now or you've been following things online, I'm aware, and I know, that some of the topics and the themes that we've been considering in recent years, particularly some of the views that I sometimes share, can occasionally push the boundaries, shall we say, of what might be seen as orthodox or inherited ideas of faith.

[1 : 42] So across various Sunday series over recent years, that has included times of challenging the view that sees the Bible as the word of God and suggesting instead that it's actually a very human book through which God can speak to us very powerfully.

I've shared my belief also on a Christ-centered, eventual, universal salvation for all, where God's redeeming love remains eternally on offer to all, even after death.

More recently, we've explored the idea that because love is never controlling, our God of love is therefore not actually in control, but instead forever working with us and the whole of creation in an uncontrolling but relentlessly loving way.

And then for a number of years now, and we'll do some more reflection on this in the year to come, I and others have become perhaps increasingly vocal about the need for the equality and inclusion of LGBTQ plus folks at every level of church life, including sharing my own personal hope to be able to bless and in time marry same-sex couples.

I know these are controversial and have been controversial topics for some, topics which over the years have pushed a few people to the edge or even over what they're prepared to accept or remain part of a church which is considering these things.

[3 : 31] And I want to say if you're currently feeling unsettled with anything that's been shared in recent times, then do please come and talk to me. Do please come and have a chat because I would love to hear from you and understand whatever ever concerns or feelings you might have on things.

But at the same time, I'm also aware that others have joined or remain part of this church in many ways because some of these topics are being shared from the front.

Indeed, the reason I, speaking for myself, personally share some of these views and this teaching is not to be controversial for its own sake.

Rather, it's twofold, really. I think firstly, as vicar, I owe it to you and I want to be as transparent as possible with you about what I believe, what I'm wrestling with, and the range of teachers and theologians and thinkers who are shaping my faith.

To say one thing up front but almost be crossing my fingers when I say it or secretly believing something else would be dishonest or hypocritical or lacking in integrity.

[4 : 49] I do try, though, to be sensitive about not sharing too many things that may be controversial, too close together, because I appreciate weighing up what for some maybe new ideas does take time to absorb and reflect on.

And a lot of this stuff has been going on for a good few years now. But then secondly, and more importantly, perhaps, the reason for sharing some of the views that I've just outlined is really because I feel compelled, compelled to do so, because I know how much some of these ideas have really fired up my faith and deepened my love for God.

And my hope is that in offering them to you, that might help you on your faith journey and maybe deepen your faith and your love for God.

Indeed, that's always the measure by which I work out what to share with you. Has it deepened my love and appreciation for God?

And is it helping me to become a more loving or more kind person? Because if it is, then of course, I want to offer it to you for your consideration, too.

[6 : 19] I'm aware, though, that the challenging nature of some of the things that we look at, there is a cost to that sometimes as well. So there's a cost for me, sometimes.

There's a cost for Gemma, too, partly because it takes courage to share some of the things I do. Courage, which I don't always have in abundance.

But also because more broadly, leadership and being vicar of a church like this, it's hard. It's hard work. And being vocal on certain issues can sometimes cost what you thought were friendships.

And there's a sadness which comes with that. More generally, though, I do appreciate that what we might call being open-minded and perhaps being stretched or challenged with what we believe and why is not always an easy or particularly secure way to live.

It is, I realize and I know, comforting and reassuring to have some things in life that we can feel sure about and build our faith on.

[7 : 36] Truths that don't change, roots that keep us grounded, familiarity that feels like home for us in our faith.

Indeed, I guess for many of us, we do see our faith like that. Yes, by definition, faith is faith and not certainty. But the assurance, the blessed assurance we sing about is something incredibly precious and life-affirming for us.

Most of all, God's faithfulness to us. Again, the faithfulness that we sing about is a truth on which we rightly build our lives.

And then connected to our personal faith more collectively, the church to which we belong is ideally a community in which we can feel rooted, you know, a safe place in which we can be ourselves, express our faith, be encouraged and encourage one another.

In the midst of so much in our world that is complicated and confusing, there's a sense when we gather of wanting, even needing church to be a haven, a harbor, sometimes a hospital, but definitely a home, you know, somewhere we can come to recharge and be refreshed and be renewed.

[9 : 03] I think in all this, I'm acutely aware, therefore, that trying to straddle these two seemingly competing qualities of being open-minded and embracing an ever-evolving view of God on the one hand, whilst remaining rooted and grounded in the constancy and truth of God's love on the other, well, that can sometimes feel like a pretty difficult balancing act to achieve, being able to do new things, but staying grounded in eternal stuff.

So how do we do that? How do we embrace change and be open-minded to new possibilities and new ways of thinking, while remaining rooted in God's love?

Well, to help us think this through today, we're going to turn to the Bible, and we're going to look at a little passage from Mark's Gospel, in which Jesus is in the temple in Jerusalem, and he's been having all sorts of debates and conversations with some of the religious leaders of the day, and they come to him, and they ask him a particular question.

A question. So it's not too long a reading, just a few verses, but let's have a look at how Jesus responds to this question. This is from Mark's Gospel, chapter 12, verses 28 to 31.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important?

[10:46] The most important one, answered Jesus, is this. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this. Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. But Jesus is asked, What the most important commandment of all is?

And that's a great question to pose. And Jesus replies by quoting a commandment from the book of Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament as we know it.

Indeed, what he quotes is one of perhaps the most famous passages of all, one that all Jewish folks, both then and now, would have said every day as a prayer.

It's these words that he quotes in Mark's Gospel. He says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

[12:00] It's a quote, as I say, from the book of Deuteronomy. Or is it? Or is it? Because if we compare what Jesus says with what we read in Deuteronomy, there's actually a slight difference.

Indeed, here's the relevant bit, the relevant verses from Deuteronomy, from chapter 6, verses 4 and 5. It says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Bit of a spot of difference for us there. What's the difference? Jesus' mind, exactly. There's no mention of mind in the original, whereas Jesus seems to add it in.

So what's going on here? Well, there are various theories as to why Jesus did this, but the one which I think seems to make most sense is that Jesus seems to be aware that in the original Hebrew Scriptures, the Hebrew word that's translated as heart, encapsulates not just feelings and emotions, as we might imagine today, but the heart was also reckoned to be the place where we think and make sense of the world.

In Hebrew thought, the heart wasn't just where our emotions come from, is where our intellect happened as well, all wrapped up in this word heart for them.

[13:37] And so because Jesus would have known this dual kind of emotional and intellectual meaning, that's why it seems he adds mind into the mix.

It seems he wants to emphasize that loving God with all we are is not just an emotional, a spiritual, and a physical thing. You know, a heart, soul, or strength thing.

No, to his audience, for him, it's also crucially he wants to get across. It's a head thing. It's a mind thing too. Jesus wants us to love God with all of our mind, all of our intellect, our wisdom, our understanding, our knowledge.

You know, basically, with all of our working things out. Now, with that in mind, what's interesting is that when we read the Gospels in light of this emphasis of Jesus' on the importance of using our brains when it comes to our faith, I think we can see all sorts of ways in which Jesus seeks to expand and open the minds of his disciples.

For example, let's think about geography and travel for a moment because although many of Jesus' disciples came from a little cluster of villages and small towns around the Sea of Galilee in the north of Israel, places like these ones, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Magdala, and so on.

[15:10] And the adult Jesus himself lived on that middle red dot there, lived in the town of Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Having called these local disciples to follow him, Jesus doesn't just stick with where they know, but throughout the Gospels, takes them to some pretty amazing range of places.

So here's a map, a modern map of the region in which Jesus operated. And each orange dot is a place mentioned in the Gospels as somewhere Jesus and the disciples visited.

So you've got the Sea of Galilee, which is that sort of cluster of orange dots up there in the middle. But rather than just staying local and keeping them in their familiar surroundings, Jesus leads his disciples to places, not just all over modern day Israel and Palestine, but places in modern day Syria and Lebanon and Jordan too.

And these dots are just the places that we're told about in the Gospels, let alone all the other places that Jesus also visited along the way, which don't get a mention in the Gospel accounts of his life.

Now looking at this travel, why would Jesus do this? Well, it may have been because he wanted to reach as many people as possible with the good news of the kingdom of God.

[16 : 42] But if that was his main driver, it doesn't explain perhaps why he waited to the age of 30 to start his public ministry. And it doesn't explain why he didn't simply spend all of his time in the bigger cities, cities like Jerusalem and so on, because they would have surely given him the largest audience most of the time.

Instead, I wonder if the sheer range of places and locations that Jesus visited with his disciples was a deliberate attempt on his part to expose his disciples to as diverse a range of places and people as possible so that their minds would be expanded, expanded to see that their God, you know, the God they knew locally, the God of their local synagogue, their fishing village, their pure but limited experience was also at work in people and places and in ways far beyond their experience and awareness and probably far outside of their own comfort zones.

In fact, time and time again, we see Jesus using the new places, the new cultural settings in which he and his disciples find themselves to champion an ever-increasing openness to the breadth of ways in which God is at work.

So for example, we see Jesus conversing at a well and sharing a drink with a woman in Samaria to engaging with a Canaanite woman up in the town of Tyre in modern-day Lebanon from dining with tax collector Zacchaeus in Jericho and then with lepers in Bethany from welcoming children who the disciples tried to shun in what is now modern-day Jordan to taking his disciples all the way up north to Caesarea Philippi which was a center of pagan worship in his day to defending the woman in Jerusalem who was caught in adultery a whole variety of people and places and I'd suggest in all of these and more Jesus is constantly trying to expand his disciples' minds and challenge their preconceived ideas so that their view of God just gets bigger and broader and I would say better. And so to go back to Jesus' answer when he's asked what the most important commandment is in emphasizing the need for us to love God not just with our heart soul and strength but with our mind as well.

[19 : 25] I think in all of this it suggests that the more open-minded the more curious the more inquisitive and the more willing we are to consider things outside of our experience and our comfort zones well that may just be a key way through which we're able to do as this command says and love the Lord our God with all of our mind.

But then alongside that challenge I suppose is also the reality that it's crucial to realize that with all these dots all these places all these new experience that the disciples were exposed to by Jesus they didn't all happen at once now instead this map here where it took them three years or so to get around all these places they took their time it's almost as if Jesus sort of said to his disciples you know I'm going to give you a three year degree course in discipleship here but in the meantime well I'm not going to tell you exactly what that course will involve I'm not going to tell you where we're going to go in advance I'm not going to show you the map I'm not going to give you no itinerary because to do so would probably have overwhelmed them if they knew all the places that they'd have gone to instead what does Jesus tell them well as we looked at in our Monday service this week without saying where they were going to go he simply said this he simply said follow me follow me together one step one day one place one encounter at a time and we're going to go at walking pace and we're going to build in time to rest time to pray time to fish time to eat time to share as we go yes I've got a destination in mind but the journey itself is part of that destination and that to me is maybe the model for us as we seek to manage this balance between being open minded and embracing change but also remaining rooted and grounded in the truth of our faith yes Jesus is on the move and he may well take us to places that will challenge and stretch us beyond what is comfortable but in this movement

Jesus is our companion and he's always patient and he's always kind and knows the right pace at which to take us as we follow him one step one day at a time so what might this look like for us getting this balance right perhaps in our daily lives what a good news I think is that although Jesus and his disciples had to travel far and wide to encounter different people in our modern world there is so much on our doorstep and easily accessible to us to help us stay open minded without needing to travel that far at all for example for me either in person or through the internet I try to make sure I'm exposed to a variety of opinions because even though I might not agree with everything they say there's always something

I can learn by seeing things through someone else's eyes who sees the world differently to the way I do so in terms of politics for example which I'm interested in I listen to the rest is politics podcast with Alistair Campbell and Rory Stewart one's a labour voice one's a conservative voice and the

insights and the discussions they have on issues from quite different viewpoints often that helps me keeps me from becoming too tribal or too closed minded with my political views in terms of my faith not only do I try to read a range of writers and listen to a range of podcasts but for a number of years now I've been meeting once a term or so with a couple of groups of vicars this is me with some of them yes we go for a curry sometimes but these are vicars who on the whole I've known this lot for about 15 years now and most of them have got very different opinions to me on church and the bible and salvation and certainly on same sex marriage but I've intentionally kept up with this group and another group of mine precisely because of our differences as I don't want to simply surround myself with people who I always agree with or always agree with me equally each year rather than go to a Christian conference where each speaker is more or less coming from the same point of view or the worship is of one particular type

I instead go to a greenbelt festival along with a number of others from here where all sorts of speakers and artists offering a range of views and experiences are on offer and that diversity of faith well that keeps me fresh keeps me questioning keeps me actively seeking what God might be saying to me and then in general I try to seek out and talk to new people as much as I can don't always find it easy I'm quite a shy person by nature and keep my head down perhaps when I can but when I'm when I'm in the zone I try and talk to new people as much as I can so this week for example had a conversation outside Aldi in Bermud with Sam the big issue seller who has come over from Bosnia and lives in La Zelle in Birmingham and we had a few minutes chatting and he shared his story and his lived reality about the difficulties in Bosnia following the war and the need to support his mother after his dad died and that conversation those few minutes with him that was far more informative to me than any amount of headlines or memes about migrants that I might see shared on Facebook might be as for me

[26 : 03] I wonder for you though I wonder for you who or what might take you out of your comfort zone and perhaps open your mind in terms of encountering different views or viewpoints if a book or a podcast is recommended sometimes from the front here even if you felt unsettled by what's been shared why not read it why not listen to that podcast see what it has to say and then make your own mind up if you've always watched perhaps the same news channel or read the same paper or followed the same Bible reading notes why not make things up a bit you know to encounter different voices different views who could you sit down with or go for a walk with who you've never spoken to before perhaps and ask them to tell you something of their story equally why not seek out those parents in our congregation whose children are gay or trans and hear what they've learned about God through that experience why not join a house group come to book club volunteer at food bank and so on and so on and so on you know

I asked earlier how do we embrace change and be open minded to new possibilities and new ways of thinking while remaining rooted in God's love and I wonder if the answer to that is actually in the question in that it's the very act of being open minded to new possibilities and new ways of thinking that helps us to remain rooted in God's love and why is that because I suspect as we explore new things that we'll find that Jesus is always one step ahead of us patiently but persistently opening our eyes to the wonders of his ways so I guess my prayer for each of us is that you and I would keep seeking to understand what it means for us to love

God with all of our heart all of our soul all of our strength and all of our mind Amen