

If you were to have a slogan of just a few words to encapsulate your life's purpose, what would it be?

Prominent in the recent election were the campaign slogans adopted by the various parties: Labour's *Let's keep moving*; National's *Strong team. More Jobs. Better Economy*; ACT's *Change your future*; the Greens' *Party Vote Green*; and New Zealand First's *Back your future* for example.

And as the campaign went on we saw how the party leaders and their candidates would repeat the slogan over and over again as they sought to build a sense of identity in the minds of the public.

Slogans can be helpful unifying tools. As they are recited repeatedly by the faithful, they are formative of identity, reinforcing the chosen defining qualities of the group.

But slogans can also be limiting because, given that in the space of so few words they are meant to convey such a freight of ideas, they can become open to misinterpretation or to the loss of vitally important nuances.

I found I couldn't watch large parts of the political debates that were on television during the campaign. There is something about people sniping at each other that I find unedifying; it leaves me rather cold.

I'm not sure how I would have felt had I been present in the temple courts during the debates that Matthew records in chapters 21 and 22 of his gospel. Again and again representatives of different groups put challenging questions to Jesus: chief priests, teachers of the Law, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians. These groups are not quite political parties in the modern sense, but they are certainly religious parties, and it would be artificial to separate their concerns from matters of politics.

Today's gospel passage is the last in the series of questions. The Pharisees are gathered, and one of their number who happens to be a teacher of the law comes to Jesus with a question to put him on the spot.

This question of "Which is the greatest commandment" was in some ways innocuous, as this was a favourite debating topic among them – perhaps rather like the famous "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin" question supposedly occupying the minds of medieval theologians. There were, apparently, 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament), so there were quite a few to choose between.

But the intention is not innocuous: the intention is again to try to trap Jesus. While the rabbi's debates permitted distinctions to be made between 'hard' and 'easy' commandments, or between more or less 'weighty' ones, in principle every command was equally binding. So if Jesus makes a careless reply in which he could be taken to imply that some of these commandments were not binding he would open himself up to a serious charge of annulling the law.¹

The first part of the answer that Jesus gives would have given no surprise, nor cause for any charge against him:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

This commandment, drawn from Deuteronomy 6, was in fact part of Jewish daily prayer. It was very very well known. Many of Jesus' hearers would have agreed with the assessment that this was the greatest of the commandments.

"This is the greatest and the first commandment", says Jesus. But then he goes on: "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Here he uses Leviticus 19:18, a key verse from the Holiness Code.

And in this second commandment Jesus makes a challenge to his hearer's sense of identity. It is as if he has presented them with a twist on their party slogan.

¹ France p.319

The commandment to love God with all one's heart and so on was, as I noted, part of Jewish daily prayer. That daily prayer began with the Shema, the words from Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one", which can also be translated as "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Recited day after day, it is effectively a slogan that identifies this people Israel as the people of God.

The challenge presented by Jesus in identifying the command to love neighbour as self is that it confronts the exclusive understanding that had grown up in Israel.² By adding this second commandment, a commandment *like the first*, he is reminding them of their covenant calling, not to exclusivism for themselves, but to be a light to the nations. To be a light to the nations, to love the neighbour, is something that should be an expression of their love for God who created and loves the nations.

Now if this were just about Israel, or just about nations or people groups as a whole, that would be a bit easier. But of course it becomes personal. For, if I am part of the people of God, then I can't say that my personal actions towards God and towards others aren't caught up in this. That would be like saying that I can be a candidate for a political party but feel free to act in a way that is contrary to its espoused values. (Yes, I know that that happens from time to time; but remember too what kind of action usually follows from its discovery!)

I don't know about you, but this commandment to love God with all my heart and soul and mind and to love my neighbour as myself feels pretty demanding. I squirm under it. I try to find wriggle room.

"All" is absolute. No chance of escape there!

Well then, is there part of me that is not embraced in the categories of heart, soul, and mind that Jesus lists?

Unfortunately, not. Because heart soul and mind are not different 'parts' of a human being, but rather are different ways of thinking of the whole human in relation to God;

² See Wright, *Matthew*, p.95-96

no clear distinction can be drawn between them. The three nouns together – together with others used in the other gospels and in other translations of the Old Testament – indicate the essential nature of the human, and the human’s ultimate, fundamental loyalty.³

What about this love your neighbour command? Surely there’s some way out there: surely I have some choice as to who falls into this neighbour category? Who is my neighbour anyway?

And then we remember that Jesus addressed this attempt to find wriggle room, in Luke 10, using the parable of the Good Samaritan.

And Jesus joins the two commandments – the second is *like* the first – which seems to confront us in the fact that to try to find some wriggle room in the second is tantamount to trying to get out of the first.

The First Epistle of John makes exactly this point:

Those who say, “I love God”, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)

On the one hand I *understand* the absolute nature of these commandments. They seem the natural corollary of what the Bible tells us of the character of God, who created us with a purpose in and for the world.

But while I *understand* them, my feelings are at times different. It just doesn’t feel very *loving* to put such heavy demands on us.

How can love manifest in demands, and be challenging and at times sharp and confronting? Shouldn’t love be cuddly, and comforting, and soft and gentle?

But actually, if we read the gospels we find that it isn’t “gentle Jesus, meek and mild”; and we find that the love of God and Jesus is sometimes expressed in ways that are

³ France, pp. 319-320

not easy.

And if we take a moment to think about it, we will recognise in our own lives that there are times when we have had to do hard things because we love. Our children hate being disciplined, but we do it because it is necessary for their ultimate wellbeing; we do it for love – to use just one simple example.

But while I get all that, I still wriggle and squirm uncomfortably under the sharp demand of these absolute commandments. What am I to do?

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The answer is hinted at in the question that Jesus then poses to the Pharisees.

“What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

“The son of David”, they replied.

Jesus said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? ... If David calls the Messiah Lord, how can he be his son?”

And the Pharisees are stumped.

It will take too long to explain this exchange in detail,⁴ but it is the implications of it that were important then and are important to us still now.

What Jesus is asking is, is the Messiah David’s son (successor to the throne of David) or is he David’s master, David’s Lord? The question amounts to what is the Messiah’s source of authority, and by implication what is the nature of the Messiah’s role. Does authority come from human lineage; or from something higher? Is the Messiah to be a military king in the mould of David; or something else?

And what is revealed in the rest of Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus is in fact both son of David and David’s Lord. Jesus is indeed the son of David, the coming King. But he is also David’s master, because he is God himself. It is God himself who has come as Messiah to represent his people, and as their representative he takes the

⁴ See France pp. 320-322; Wright, *Matthew*, pp.94, 95.

consequences of his people's failure to love God with all their heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbours as themselves.

In going to the cross, Jesus brings the saving, healing, reconciling rule of this creator God to the whole world.

In going to the cross, Jesus fulfils the two great commandments and becomes enthroned as both David's son and David's Lord.

So now my wriggly, squirmy self asks, does that mean that I'm off the hook from the absolute demands of these two commandments? If Jesus has done it all, does that I can sit back and do what I like?

And the answer is 'No' of course. But in the Messiah the commandments have shifted in character from being orders to be obeyed in our own strength, to becoming invitations and promises into a new way of life.⁵

Given all that God has done for us in Jesus, surely gratitude impels us to do our utmost to express love to God, and to express our love for God in love for neighbour.

And, I strongly believe, it is through wholehearted love for God and neighbour that we will ultimately see a complete and lasting fulfilment to the kinds of hopes lying behind such slogans as *Let's keep moving; Strong team. More Jobs. Better Economy; Change your future; Party Vote Green; and Back your future.*

⁵ Wright, *Matthew*, p.95

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