

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Greatest Commandment

If you're worried about commandments - and Jewish people, with 631 to worry about, were - it might help to ask which of them is the most important. Jesus is well able to answer, and he does it as any Jew would: by quoting from the Law (the first five books of the Bible). Deut. 6 gives him the great Creed of his people: *Listen, O Israel: the Lord your God is the One, the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.*

The One, the Only Lord

Obedying the One God makes you into one person - "all your heart, soul, and strength" committed together in one loving gift. That's what human perfection is, in a Jewish nutshell. This surrender of everything is the first commandment. It sounds costly, and it is. But does it rob you of other possibilities? Not if it's real. Real love always *enriches the lover*; Giving generously and totally makes us truly wealthy. It's true in human terms: but the love of God enriches us with a divine dimension to our lives. Loving God wouldn't be possible for us unless God had loved us first - enough to make us, to set us in his world, to show us what he is like, and by his grace to make us share divine life. But once we're on the way to knowing God, we shall want to respond with our love, and this is the greatest and the first of all experiences. *Being loved by the most wonderful human being imaginable* would only be a pale reflection of this. I believe that this is what we are made for, and that we will never be happy until we realise it with our whole hearts.

The Second Commandment

is the one very many people try to put first. It is to be found in Leviticus 19: *love your neighbour as yourself*. These commandments, notice, are not invented by Jesus. They are the heart of the Old Testament, of the Law of Moses, promulgated in thunder from the top of Mt Sinai. The God of Israel is terrible, but his power is commanding us to love - of which we are, of all things, most afraid. What I think is important here is that Jesus places love of neighbour *second* - and I would say *subsequent* - to love of God. It is as if the

unquestionable, primary, first loyalty we have is always to God. Love, and friendship, and loyalty to other people are dependent on that, guided by it, embraced within it. This is a wonderful mystery.

I'm Only Human

For my happiness to be full, I need much more than any human being can be asked to give me. And I know how very little I can offer to secure the life of those *I* love. *Human beings need God to save them*; and we are blessed if we learn this fact so deeply that we are no longer seeking salvation from one another. Even when human love is very deep, it is still short of the divine. You can learn this truth in a very hard school: the fallen friendships, failed marriages, and unrequited love which make our lives look like Saddam's army after Desert Storm are a way of learning it hard. We must not look to each other, for the kind of power that belongs only to God; and we must not pretend we are able to offer his gifts amongst ourselves: we must not pretend that there are other ways to arrive at salvation. If only we could love one another in the order Jesus teaches us: *God with all our lives, then one another as ourselves!* The real 'me', that is secured by the power of God's love, would be worthier of the trust of others than is the vainglorious and fatuous 'me' that is relying on human resources alone.

Humility

It's a holy thing for us to realise our true size and importance in the scheme of things: to know what we can do for one another, and what is beyond us. This is another of the ways in which experience teaches us that the way into life is through a low doorway, and that we must bow our heads in order to enter. In humility we offer each other what little we have; we have no illusions about being able to do more. Not a comfortable thing to acknowledge. But the awful alternative! The crushing weight of unredemption can break any heart; we cannot shoulder it by ourselves. How liberating then, in our poverty, to rely on the love of God to make us worthy of each other!

Fr Philip