

Thursday 25th June 2020

“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?”

“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.”

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Mark 12:28-33

When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment was, one aspect of his answer is sometimes overlooked. Note that we are instructed to love God not only with our heart and soul and strength; we are also to love him with all our mind. The teacher of the law who asked the original question reaffirms this, saying we are to love God “with all our understanding”.

Our mind is a gift from God and we should not be afraid to use it to question and challenge what we read in the Bible. In the passage above, what was Jesus doing? He was debating the meaning of the law (that is the Hebrew scriptures) first with the Pharisees and then with Sadducees. These were two of the three major schools of Jewish religious and political thought at the time (the third being the Essenes) and they differed in many areas of scriptural interpretation. It might seem unusual to us to see Jesus joining in a debate with them as they discuss such issues. It is true that Jesus’ answer makes it clear that the most important thing is to focus on God, rather than quibble over technicalities; but repeatedly we see Jesus in the temple and elsewhere, engaging with other teachers in discussions over the meaning of the scriptures.

Are we sometimes afraid to think through some of the implications of what the scriptures mean to us and for the world? Do we sometimes shy away from asking difficult questions because we are worried about what the answer might lead to? Are we too often content to rely on what we have been told or have always thought a passage means without taking the time to contemplate its real meaning for us.

This is not an argument to play “Devil’s advocate” and pick arguments for the sake of it. Jesus has very strong words for those who seek to confuse and lead others astray. Earlier on (Mark 9:42), Jesus says:

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

We are not to engage in sophistic discussions for their own sake and display our own intellectual prowess; but we are allowed – in fact we are encouraged – to apply our minds fully in the study of the word of God. If we are genuine in our approach and if we are open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide us, then such questioning does not lessen our faith, it increases our understanding and can enrich our faith. Applying our mind, contemplating and questioning the meaning of the scriptures, is key to our growth as Christians.