

In 1990 – Father Paul (who is now the warden at Ascot Priory) was working at a church in Australia at a place I cannot pronounce – MORYUA???

In the dry season the grass was burnt brown, but at other more seasonable times was lush and green and grew quite high, particularly in the meadow next to the church. A verger would cut the grass and something about this puzzled Father Paul. The verger cut the grass round the church and the church yard, but then cut a path through the meadow to a large tree and cut a circle around the large tree.

He couldn't quite work out why they did this so in a moment of curiosity asked the verger why they cut the path in the meadow and the circle round the tree?

The verger showed Father Paul the instructions on the back of the vestry door which sure enough has a plan for the church yard, the path and the tree. The instructions had been there since the 1920's.

What no-one had taken the trouble to read or discover was the purpose for the path and the circle round the tree.

In the early part of the century the Vicar had ridden about the parish on a horse and used to tether the horse in the shade under the tree and needed a path to walk through the long grass to the church. When horses were replaced with motor vehicles, the pattern of cutting the grass the same way it had always been cut simply carried on. No-one asked why? What for? What's the point?

Having a plan and carrying on regardless seems to be a pattern with the church – the Pharisees had just the same mentality. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 6 it says - Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

In answer to the question "How do we love God like that?" they hit upon an answer – "We follow all the laws of Moses and all the additional laws to the letter!"

Whether or not it brought people close to God, whether or not it satisfied peoples desire for God, whether or not it helped people reflect the love of God in their living was irrelevant – this was how to love God, Heart, Soul and Strength and they just kept on doing that.

How dubious would you be if Victoria and Marcello told you that they had hit on the fool-proof solution to parenting Noah, they had a plan and they would be sticking to it from now until he left home??

Those of us at the other end of the parenting task can advise that what works for an infant doesn't work for a toddler, or a teenage. As a parent you have to have your guiding principals but the "HOW" stays a live question.

"HOW" we love God with Heart, Soul, Mind or Strength needs to remain a live question that we keep asking. If we think we've found the answer, before long, we will have made rules to follow and miss the desire God has for us in learning to love Him as He loves us. Love doesn't flourish well if it's simply about rules.

Love the Lord you God October 2017

A long time before Deuteronomy was written Noah was answering the question in his own way. How did he love God with heart, soul and strength?

In a time when humankind was lawless, wicked and sinful Noah stands out as righteous. Listen to this lovely verse.

Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord – he was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time and he walked with God.

What a fabulous notion – he walked with God. We cannot wrestle with the question of how we love God with heart, soul and strength in an abstract way – it has to look like something, it has to shape how we live.

When I worked in the Fish and Chip shop with my Father my voice became identical to his. I probably spoke like him anyway, but working together every day made it even more so. If I answered the phone people thought it was my Dad.

It only occurred to me the other day that when I'm chatting with my Mother part of the reason she calls me Lawrence is because a) we probably have conversations in the same way she would have chatted with dad and B) I still sound like him.

On occasions the phone would go and it would be a supplier and I would need to order. Because we worked closely together and I understood the business I could confidently order.

To love God fully means to orientate ones life towards God. It's like sitting in the sunshine and moving your

chair round every so often to face the sun. The more time we spend with God, in worship, in reading His word, in prayer, in fellowship with others, the more we become like Him. The more time we spend with God we pick up what he is like without trying too hard.

Here's another Father Paul story. He prepared a group of children for confirmation and being from a higher church tradition taught the children how and when to cross themselves. After the service the Bishop came and said, do you realise that when the children cross themselves they do this.

[note – they ended the action by touching their noses]

Without realising it, Father Paul usually ended the action by pushing his glasses back up his nose and the children simply copied.

The more time we spend with God – the more we become like Him, the more capacity we have to love indiscriminately like He does, and to love him the way he loves us.

Noah walked with God, and when God revealed his plans to Noah, he was obedient and built the ark as God requested.

The final part of the Noah story reveals that God is willing to make a covenant – an agreement – with humankind.

Covenant agreements were common in the near and middle east. They were written between Kings who conquered other Kings, Kings who formed alliances with other Kings, King's who wanted to align themselves with

Love the Lord you God October 2017

a more powerful neighbour. Typically the Covenant set out what was required of each party. If you do this – I will do that. If you don't do what we have covenanted – there will be consequences.

In Genesis chapter 9 God instigates a covenant, He is the one offering an agreement. He tells Noah to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over the animals of whole earth –tucked into the story is a strict instruction not to eat any animal that still has the life-blood in it. There's a declaration about taking the life of another man...*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. V6*

If Noah and his descendants do what God commands, God promises to never again repeat the flood and remove mankind from the face of the earth – his covenant is remembered with the rainbow.

The story reveals that our God is a God who saves and instigates and is willing to make a covenant with His people. We also have the example of Noah who was blameless and obedient.

In our season on The Kingdom of Heaven, our Gospel readings from Matthew have Jesus in the temple debating, teaching, arguing and answering questions with the chief priests and the Pharisees. These are the ones who love God by following the endless rules of the law.

Having silenced virtually everyone an expert in the Law tries to test Jesus – which is the greatest commandment.

Jesus answer is brilliant. It's authentically Jewish and it is unanswerable. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your Soul and with all your mind this is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it, love your neighbour as yourself.*

It steers us away from the dryness of loving God by following rules into an active place where we learn to love the way God loves.

There are three directions for our love.

Firstly – to love God...we've been speaking about that. Secondly, to love our neighbour. We cannot love God if we are not loving those whom God loves and God loves everything he has made.

Thirdly, we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. That can be tricky...because quite a lot of people don't love themselves very much.

My eldest sister lived in Worcester at one time and had a rather difficult neighbour. It turned out that this lady suffered from mental health issues, but it didn't stop her shouting at Gill occasionally, throwing things over the hedge, being difficult.

Having prayed about this for quite some time, Gill decided to go round and meet the lady at her door and just ask her if something was the matter, had something happened, what was it about. As far as I can recall there was a misunderstanding in this ladies rather befuddled mind, but it changed things. From then on Gill was able to wave to her as she peeked out of the window, smile at her and it quietened down... as I say she had mental health problems.

Love the Lord you God October 2017

Loving your neighbour is easy if you have a lovely neighbour. Loving your neighbour when they are troublesome is a lot harder.

Loving yourself can be just as big a challenge. We can become pretty hard on ourselves. We can be at peace with God, we can be at peace with our neighbours we might not be at peace with ourselves.

Jesus answer is brilliant. It silences his critics and yet provides us with something we need to keep returning to...how do I love God with heart, soul and strength. It leaves no room for complacency. How do I love my neighbours. How do I love myself?

Today's sermon doesn't finish with a neat take away and a simple thing we can all start doing OTHER than to keep the question live and ask ourselves – How do I love God with heart and soul and strength?

As you get to know me, you will learn to be unsurprised when I either quote from or use Brother Lawrence as an example.

Nicholas Herman was a large rather clumsy chap who at one time was someone's footman and then joined the army but he longed to become a religious and joined a Carmelite monastery – but he did so as a lay-brother...he wasn't a full on monk.

Yet this ordinary, somewhat uneducated man who worked in the kitchens at the monastery discovered a way of living that is best described as 'practising the presence of God'.

There remain just a few records of conversations he had and letters he wrote, but after his death these were collected and published.

Three quotes.

Brother Lawrence took seriously that God wants to Covenant with us and is faithful. That if we seek to live a kingdom life, asking forgiveness when we fail and learning to love the way God loves, it opens up a new experience. Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were said that the people of Holy Trinity are known by their love...that they are a people who walk with God.