

**QUESTION** How can we, as the Church representing Jesus, be more effective at showing His transforming love to the world, rather than reducing it to the kind of rituals and regulations which Jesus derided?

**Hebrews 9:11-14** – The cleansing of the blood of Christ enables love

**Christ's sacrifice changes us in a way the blood of calves and goats never could**

11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation.

*"Greater... perfect tabernacle" – a comparison between the tent that preceded the temple with its hammered gold lamp stand for seven lamps and its consecrated bread, and the 'heavenly tent' around God's presence. The man-made tent was a poor shadow of the real thing which Christ entered to take his high priestly seat.*

12-13 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

**IN PRACTICE** The flesh nature – how we behave naturally as human kind – is inherently selfish and self protective, and therefore not disposed to be generous to others. We live in competition, not collaboration. Loving others is optional, depending on what we feel – because we readily store up resentments accumulated by emotional collisions with others. Coming to Christ and having a personal relationship with God brings the Holy Spirit's dynamic to counteract and change this self-centred flesh nature. We have hurt God by our selfishness and rebellion, but He has forgiven us – massively. This is the work of the blood of Christ, not only spiritual forgiveness for sin, but emotional cleansing of conscience from the effect of sin. Now we can think and act differently, with a generosity of spirit towards others. It is still a choice – we need to constantly be reminded how Christ's blood has cleansed us – but it is an empowered choice. We can reflect God's love and generous spirit to us, in how we relate to others.

**QUESTION** Christ's blood is all-powerful and effective, but how do we assert this? How is remembering, re-enacting and speaking it out balanced, in your tradition?

**PRAYER** Father, we see selfishness, hatred and war all around us, yet You sent Jesus to be the embodiment of Your way of love and the means to achieve it. Fill us with Your love and empower us to use it to bring change to our sphere of influence. Amen.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

*"Once for all" – a comparison between the repeated sacrifices of the Levitical priest, each of which was a partial remedy for sin, and Christ's sinless sacrifice, final, effective and unrepeatable.*

14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

*"How much more" – an argument from less to greater. The comparison emphasises the power of remembering, enacting and declaring what Christ's blood has done for us. The balance between these actions varies across Christian traditions.*

# The Living Word

www.thelivingword.uk PRINT EDITION

The Bible readings for Sunday, November 4, 2018, with commentary

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, November 4**, in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **The priority of returning God's love to Him and to others**

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 – First love God with all your heart

Ruth 1:1-18 – Ruth decides to trust God and look after Naomi

Mark 12:28-34 – The Great Commandment to love God, love others

Hebrews 9:11-14 – The cleansing, releasing power of the blood of Christ

Also: Psalm 146

## Deuteronomy 6:1-9 – First love God with all your heart

### The foundation of the First Great Commandment

1-2 These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

*"Fear the Lord your God" – 'revere' for His goodness, would come closer than 'fear' (of the consequences) although both are in the meaning. What follows is predicated on Israel's covenanted relationship with a loving, sustaining, providing God i.e. Exodus 34:5-7 "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love... and forgiving..."*

3 Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

*"Be careful to obey" – understood in terms of the heart and soul and passion of v.5, see note to vv. 6-8.*

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

*"The Lord is one" – distinctive among other tribes and nations who worshipped and attempted to placate various deities related to life's threats. Scripture is progressive revelation, and "The Lord is one" remains a truth that overarches God revealing Himself in His Son, and then the awareness of the third Person, the Holy Spirit of God, guiding and empowering the Early Church and our mission today.*

5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

*"Hear, O Israel" – recited by Jews both in the synagogue and daily as well, this Shema (Hebrew for 'hear') passage is a foundational confession of faith, as the Nicene Creed has become in the Church of England.*

*"Love the Lord" – love in English has a broad range of meanings. This has the sense of 'adore, revere, be committed to' in the way people show their devotion to a popular monarch, like Trooping the Colour in London every June.*

6-8 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk

about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

*"On your hearts... foreheads" – the sense of verse 6 was lost on some Jewish sects who tied a small box*

*containing the text over their heads. We, too, tend to substitute rules and routines, which we find easier to control, for the heart relationship that the Lord wants – which is evident enough.*

9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

## Ruth 1:1-18 – Ruth decides to trust God and look after Naomi

### A choice to do what is right

1-2 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

*"When the judges ruled" – following Joshua and preceding Saul and David, probably around 1100 BC.*

*"Ephrathites" – the area around Bethlehem village, as in Micah's prophecy foretelling the Messiah's birth in "Bethlehem Ephrathah", Micah 5:2*

*"Mahlon and Kilion" – both names descriptive of weak constitution.*

3-5 Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one

named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

*"Married Moabite women" – not forbidden although classed as outsiders – there was a 10-generation ban on "entering the assembly of the Lord". However marriage and continuation of the family line was socially essential.*

*"Naomi was left" – the plight of Ruth's mother-in-law is set out early in the story. Life could be very hard and vulnerable for an unsupported widow in that culture.*

6-7 When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

**IN PRACTICE** Ruth and Naomi walk us through what it means to return God's love by trusting Him and choosing His way in our relationships with others. They faced an uncertain future as women in a man's world, their menfolk having been taken from them. Do they blame God, or trust Him? Do they do what gives them most opportunity, or choose to do what is right? Life and its pressures and choices hasn't changed in three thousand years, except that we have many more choices we can make, and many more options for self-determination rather than seeking God's best and trusting Him in it. We have too much practice in making easy but low-value choices, and we need to work up our skills in making high-value and lasting ones – seeking God and trusting Him for His way.

**QUESTION** *Trusting God, doing what is right by Him, making high value choices is difficult. Who can share this with you, and encourage you?*

## Mark 12:28-34 – The Great Commandment, love God, love others

### Unselfishness a guiding principle of the kingdom of God

28 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?"

*"One of the teachers of the law" – until now in Mark they have been hostile; this was a friendly and teachable one, probably a Pharisee scribe.*

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

30 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 most important..." – the rabbis had codified the law into 613 statutes, and debated which were 'weighty' and which were 'lighter'. Jesus starts by quoting the familiar 'Shema' or 'Hear' passage (which opens worship in synagogues today).*

31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

*"The second is this" – Jesus puts together two sayings that were widely separated in the law, and so not expected to be combined. The first summarises commandments 1-4 about loving God wholeheartedly, the second summarises commandments 5-10 about*

*moral responsibility and treating others well. His point is that they cannot be separated. God, who loves us, expects us to return His love by putting Him first and by honouring others, loving them as He does.*

32-33 "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."

*"You are right" – this particular scribe had seen that God, whose overriding characteristic is mercy, required just and merciful behaviour, without which the ceremonial was meaningless.*

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

*"Not far from the kingdom" – the scribe had the right priorities, but entering the kingdom would require him to recognise and speak out the reality of the Son of God, who would shortly die in his place as a sacrifice for his sins.*

**For further study:** *The Great Commandment unfolds, Deut. 6:46; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 5:43; Matt. 22:36-40; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Gal. 5:14.*

**IN PRACTICE** This man had grasped the teaching and understood the way it fits together. He knew the priorities – a lack of moral compass and concern for others cancels out any good religious intentions we can perform. First things first, and with God, that is always mercy! The second teaching here is about the spirit of the law versus the legalism of the law. Jesus upholds the broad intention of the law by being the fulfilment of the law. He shows what it looks like to know God's love, and so to be provoked into returning it in devotion to God, that results in having a heart of mercy and generosity to others. By contrast, the Jewish teachers and scribes majored on the fine details of observance, where their response to God had become formulaic rather than feeling. We can't reduce the teaching of Jesus to a formula; either it is heartfelt or it is reduced to head-knowledge. To change the world around us – being bringers of the kingdom of God – must start with us having a heart change. We can't give what we haven't got.