

High St Uniting Church Frankston

The Core of Faith

Mark 12:28 – 34



You may be familiar with the word shibboleth, it comes from a story in the book of Judges, where pronunciation of the word distinguished one tribe from another, where some people pronounced shibboleth, others could only say, sibboleth. And because of that story, whatever the word meant in ancient Israel, it has come to mean a word or phrase that establishes identity or differentiates between two groups. The word came to my mind in reading today's little story from Mark. In effect, the scribe who comes to Jesus is asking him a shibboleth, "What is the first commandment?" The answer to the question will determine if Jesus is orthodox, one

of us according to the scribe, or if he is bringing some radical new teaching.

These stories of Jesus in the Temple after the grand entrance into Jerusalem, a little out of time because they set up the context for Easter, not Christmas, are characterised by contention and argument as the various religious leaders, out of fear or jealousy or simply in defence of their position and faith, challenge Jesus with tricky questions. Questions designed to trap Jesus into saying something controversial in that very public place. But this question feels different; this scribe comes across as sympathetic to Jesus and is giving him a chance to state his case by asking a real question and not a trick one. When we hear, "What is the first commandment?", we may think he means the first in the list of the ten and expect to hear, "I am the Lord, your God who brought you out of Egypt, you shall have no other gods but me." But hidden in the Greek is the word 'proton'; not necessarily first as in order but central, core, most important, and so Jesus finds his answer in Moses address to the people, the Shema, where the most important commandment is the call to place love of God at the centre of your life. Jesus is not offering some radical new teaching to drag the people away from God, he is reiterating the call of the prophets to take the love of God seriously; to make it the core and heart of your life.

This idea of shibboleth pops up in an episode of the TV drama series *The West Wing*, a detailed look at the life of a US President and his staff. In the episode, a boat load of refugees from China arrives and claim asylum because they are Christians and would be persecuted if they were sent back to China. To make sure of their claims and make sure of the correct diplomatic action, the President invites the leaders of the group to the White House and tests them, because he says, "I know the right shibboleth to ask." The writers of the show were tactful enough to not let us hear the question the President asks, but in the light of today's story of Jesus in the Temple, what question would you ask someone to determine if they really were a Christian, a follower of Jesus?

Scripture tells us that no one can say, "Jesus is Lord", unless the Spirit is with them. Maybe that's the question; "Who is Jesus?" Some might point to the confession in the traditional Communion liturgy, 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' Maybe that's the question; "Why are you called a Christian?" But I think, behind all the theology of the cross and salvation and baptism and confession, the heart of our faith is the same as Jesus' answer, we are called to love God with all we are and to share that love with people around us as

much as we love ourselves. So maybe a better shibboleth, a better test question is, "What does God want from us?" Where the answer is love.

Beyond confession of what we believe, love is much more than an emotion or warm feeling or kind thought. Love is a verb, a call to action, as shown by the conditions that are a part of these love commands that come from the foundation of the people of Israel and are repeated and reclaimed by Jesus. Maybe a more important shibboleth is, "How do you love God and love your neighbour?"

Love God with all your heart. That is, don't leave room for other allegiances. Not money, or politics, or social media, or business, or self-improvement programs. Let your first and best thought be, "What does God want for my life?"

Love God with all your soul. That is, let your spirituality be dominated by God, the Creator and Sustainer of all, the source of life and the holder of your life.

Love God with all your mind. That is, don't let other philosophies or ideas push your mind away from God. The Psalmist says, "I delight in your word and meditate on it all day."

Love God with all your strength. That is, let all your daily activity be done in the light of God's love. Don't let, "I'm tired" or "I'm busy", stop you from living out love in every action.

Love your neighbour as yourself. While there is an assumption that you do love yourself, and maybe that's another whole sermon, this commandment calls us action way beyond thoughts and feelings. If you love yourself enough to dress warm and comfortable on a cold night, then show the same love to the homeless. If you love yourself enough to eat well and seek medical care, then show the same love to the hungry and the suffering.

Now I understand that talking of shibboleth implies that there is a correct answer, and, of course, with so many books and writers in scripture there are actually many answers. Jesus' answer to the scribe is a good description of the core and heart of our faith, but the grandeur and wonder of all that God did in Jesus may bring out other answers from people about what they believe and what gives them faith and hope. And the modern vagaries around the word love may call you to find other words, like compassion and care and justice. But I think the core of faith for all of us, whatever words and terms you use, is to respond to all that God has done for us with the same heart and mind and strength for God and for all those around us.