

Have you heard the saying "Give it to me in a nutshell"? Basically, tell me what I need to know, but keep it short. Don't bother me with unnecessary detail. Don't bore me with a long, technical explanation. Just get to the bottom line.

I don't know about you but I like things short and sweet.

Give it to me in a nutshell! That's what the lawyer said to Jesus — At least I think that is what he meant. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" (22:36).

This man was not a lawyer as we know lawyers today — he was a religious scholar. The law was Jewish Torah law — Old Testament commandments. There were 613 such laws. You are familiar with some of them. Thou shalt not steal. They shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Others are less familiar. One law, for example, forbade boiling a calf in its mother's milk. Observant Jews today still take care not to mix meat and milk. Many observant families have one set of dishes for meat and another set for dairy products.

So when the lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" he was asking about Torah law — religious commandments. Matthew tells us that this lawyer asked Jesus this question to test him – trying to trip him up. If he can get Jesus to pronounce one law most important, this lawyer is sure that he can twist things to embarrass Jesus — to discredit him. That is what he intends to do. But Jesus knows what is going on. He understands that this man is his enemy. He understands that he is treading on dangerous ground.

Have you ever experienced anything like that — being challenged "out of the blue" by a person whom you knew to be an enemy, or put on the spot by someone trying to trip you up; to get you to make a mistake? It is pretty scary. it's also very hurtful. But Jesus didn't let it faze him. He didn't hesitate for a moment. He answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first

commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

What a great answer. Most of us have heard this story before, and knew what Jesus was going to say. Love God! Love your neighbour! Great answer! How could anyone argue with that?

But the other question is, how can anyone do that – love God and love your neighbour? Love God? Usually not a problem. At least it is not a problem when things are going well. During those times of our lives when we are healthy, wealthy and wise, it is easy to love God. Thank you, God, for my good life! Thank you, God, for my family — my health — my job! It’s easy enough to love God when things are going really well — although sometimes we forget God when things are going really well.

It is often possible to love God when things are going really badly too — when life brings us to our knees. Then we find time to pray.

But most of us know that it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes when things go badly, we don’t like God. Have you heard the question "How could God let this happen?" Sadly I heard it from my grandmother when I was young. A devout Christian who lost her husband and two sons within two years – She just kept asking ‘how could God let this happen?’ and sadly she died with that on her lips. But thankfully, much of the time when things are going badly, we find it easy to love God, because we realize that we need God's help, and we want God near us.

Love your neighbour - Now we get to the hard part. That depends on who our neighbour happens to be. In my eighteen house moves, on the whole I have been fortunate in having good neighbours. Cheerful – always helpful. If I needed to borrow a cup of sugar or a lawnmower, I knew that they would lend it to me. I liked them a lot. But then I had other neighbours who were noisy. Annoying me by getting up very early in the morning and slamming doors, running their car engines – you know the sort? Perhaps I should tell you that the good neighbour

and the bad neighbour were the same people – on the whole good people – I really shouldn't complain – but I'm human and I do.

And then there are the really serious neighbour problems – the ones at church – people whom we really find difficult to like – but with whom we might serve on the same committees, the same teams, the same choir. It is easy enough to love a neighbour who we like, but what about the neighbour we don't?

I think we all know that the love about which Jesus was speaking is not the warm fuzzy feeling that we think of as love. The commandment about loving your neighbour comes from Leviticus 19.

There is nothing in that chapter about warm fuzzy feelings. There is nothing about enjoying the neighbour's company. Love, in that context, is more about how we act, than how we feel – although it does prohibit hate and grudge bearing. Grudge bearing? How can I get through the day without a little grudge bearing?

That is a good question. How can we go through life avoiding the bad things that Jesus wants us to avoid – and doing the good things that he wants us to do? How can we keep from saying bad things about our neighbour – especially when our neighbour deserves it? How can we control our feelings? How can we keep from hating a bad neighbour?

The answer is that we can't – at least not on our own. I can tell myself every day not to hate my neighbour, and end up hating myself for hating my neighbour.

I can try really hard not to engage in grudge bearing, but it probably isn't going to work. In each case, what makes it hard is the pride of our own petty egos that seek the self, rather than the good of the other. Laying down our egos, our long-nurtured grudges and resentments, and seeking the way of love is the way of the cross, through which we find fullness of life in Christ

If I am going to love my neighbour, I must first love God — and then be willing to let God help me to love my neighbour. The lawyer asked Jesus for one great

commandment, but Jesus gave him two — love God — love your neighbour. The two go together. Each leans on the other and helps to support it.

We might find it impossible to love our neighbour, but it becomes possible, eventually, when we first love God. God not only tells us to love our neighbour — God re-shapes our hearts to make it possible. So these two loves go together — love of God and love of neighbour.

One last thought. As I said, the love of which Jesus speaks here is more about what we do than how we feel. Jesus isn't calling for us to feel warm feelings for God or neighbour. He is calling us to show our love for God by our obedience to God — and he is calling us to love our neighbour by acting in loving ways — by acts of kindness — by loving service — by gentle words and generous deeds. What we will find, if we do this — if we obey God and do good deeds for our neighbour, our fellow members of St. Cuthbert's — is that feelings follow actions.

Our loving actions will help us, in God's time, to feel the warmth and affection that we could never feel otherwise. We should live as Paul explained to the Thessalonians — “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

Love God. Love your neighbour. It is God's way and it is a very good way! I pray daily for God to give me strength to do so — what about you?

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, give us the strength to live as Jesus commanded, even in times of difficulty and hurt. Keep us firm in our faith and strong in love. In Jesus name we pray. Amen