

## INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, Mae and I were privileged to be part of a Bar Mitzvah. It was in San Francisco. We had journeyed there especially to be part of this important event.

You may be wondering why these Canadian Baptists, steeped in our Baptist faith, living quiet retirement in Ontario, were a part of this service so important to the Jewish community in a city so far away?

A moment to explain.

Adam Rose is the son of Joanne, Mae's sister, and Bill. Adam took a degree in engineering and went on to excel in the tech sector, founding his own company and moved to Silicon Valley where he met and married Adina, a woman of the Jewish tradition. Their son Zackary, turning 13, was to become a Bar Mitzvah but his grandma, Joanne, had died a few years ago. Mae and I journeyed to San Francisco to represent Mae's family. We were invited to take part in the ceremonial passing of the Torah from generation to generation till it came to Zack who then read the Hebrew text very ably indeed.

Mae and I were at the head of the line. The Rabbi took the Torah from the ark; it was sheathed in a beautiful embroidered velvet bag. He told us to hold it close to our cheek and feel the spirit of the law. This particular scroll was scribed over a century ago in a little village in what is now the Czech Republic. It was smuggled out of Europe during the Holocaust and brought to the USA to serve the refugee communities.

The Rabbi placed it into my arms. I took it carefully and held it close. I gave the Torah a hug and tried to open my spirit to what the Torah had to offer. An understanding dawned in my soul, an appreciation of what the Torah meant to Jewish people. I felt I was touching the very centre of Jewish faith, holding 3000 years of wisdom and understanding of God.

There are over 600 commandments in the Torah and they are central to the Jewish faith. Bar Mitzvah means "Son of the Commandments." When I held the Torah, I sensed the intimate and personal relationship with the law that is the Jewish faith. People find structure for their lives, nurture for their souls and guidance in their daily walk. The reference to the law as sweeter than honey in the Psalms makes sense to me now.

The experience of hugging the Torah gave a much deeper meaning to the question in today's Gospel, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

This brings us to the Gospel reading for this Sunday:

Please stand as you are able for the reading of the gospel.

## The Gospel Matthew 22:34-40

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.*

*"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"*

*He said to him, "'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 neighbor as yourself.'*

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

***This is the Holy Gospel. Thanks be to God.***

This exchange between Jesus and a lawyer is recorded in all three gospels but with variations and in a different context in each account. However, the core of the exchange is the same. A lawyer asks what is the greatest commandment. Jesus cites the commandment from Deuteronomy that comes immediately after the Shema, the ritual proclamation, *Hear O Israel God, your God is one*. That commandment tells us to Love God with our entire self, heart, soul and mind. Then Jesus notes the second greatest commandment – Love your neighbour as yourself.

After holding the Torah myself I have a profoundly greater appreciation of the importance of the question posed to Jesus and the impact of his answer. In Mark's version, the first written account, the lawyer is not trying to entrap Jesus. The question is sincere and I expect he was hanging on every word of Jesus's answer.

*"What is the greatest commandment".* The commandments were the people's path to God; they were the core of the faith. Every Jew was a *Bat or Bar Mitzvah*, a daughter or son of the commandments although at that time the girls had not been deemed worthy of the title.

The gospel of Luke adds "strength" in the list, so combined the gospels give us a succinct summary of the human psyche, heart, soul, mind and strength, that is, passion, spirit, intellect, bodily strength. Just as the Shema expresses our deep belief in the unity of God so we are asked to love God with the totality of our being, one unified devotion and service to God. Let me take a few moments to think about each of these components of the human person and about what it means to Love God and with our entire being.

### Heart

The heart is the traditional symbol of the emotions, devotion, and love. Valentines' day is festooned with hearts; they are everywhere. It is also the long-standing symbol of compassion and commitment. We say that one puts the whole heart into a cause is to say there is a passion for it. God says *If with all your heart you truly seek me you shall surely find me.*

Hearts feature dominantly in wedding celebrations too. I think of the Song of Solomon or more properly the Song of Songs. It is a passionate love poem celebrating the love of two people for one another. I believe it is in the Bible because there is a connection between the love shared by human partners and the love between God and humans. The flame of our human love is kindled from the eternal flame of the love of God. The devotion of our hearts reaching out to others and toward God comes from one source and is of one substance with the eternal logos the Word incarnate.

I have visited with couples married 60 – 65 even 70 years and I have seen mirrored in their love, the image of God's love for us. Such earthly love is a gift, not earned, and perhaps not deserved, just as the grace of God is a sublime gift. And in response we are compelled to love God with all our heart. **You shall love God with all your heart.**

### **Soul**

Soul is traditionally the mysterious essence of human personhood, the part of the human psyche that is a fragment of eternity. It is the house of the spirit of God within us. There are many questions and much debate about the soul. I have heard the theory that there is a part of the brain that uniquely responds to religious stimulation. This is said to be the seat of the soul. Other experiments have found a loss of weight from the human body shortly after death which is said to mark the departure of the soul. This type of enquiry misses the point. I believe the human spirit which we call *soul* is an integral part of the human person that emerged in the eons long journey from the origins of life on earth to the species Homo Sapiens.

I remember a dramatic reading about creation performed at our church. It contained a poetic description of the birth of the human soul.

*In an unrecorded moment lost in a time, before words, a human gazed at the silent stars, their mystery and their beauty, and the faintest glimmer of questions tormented that human's thoughts. Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here?  
And in those questions, God was speaking to that human and breathing into that human's nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living soul.*

The soul emerges from the questing mind, seeking the ground and source of our being. It is an unending quest, for there is always more to understand about God and life. To serve God with all your soul is to pursue that quest while life lasts and by faith beyond  
**You shall love God with all your soul.**

## Mind

In his drama *A Man for All Seasons* Robert Bolt brought Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England during the reign of Henry VIII, to the modern stage. More was a devout Catholic, loyal to the Pope but his King, Henry VIII, had renounced the rule of the Pope, declared himself head of the Church of England, and passed the Act of Supremacy, requiring all England to conform to the laws and liturgy of the Church of England. All public officials were required to sign it to demonstrate loyalty to the King. It was treason to oppose the King. Treason carried the death penalty and More knew that Henry would not hesitate to use it.

In the play, when More receives a copy of the act, he calls on his daughter Margaret – also a lawyer like him, to help him examine it to see if there was any way he could sign it.

Margaret protests “Father, you cannot sign it. It betrays all you live for.”

More replies, “No, Margaret, if there is any pretext, any loophole I will sign”.

And then he explains, “God made angels to show him splendor. Humans he made to serve him wittily in the tangle of their minds”.

To serve God with our minds, that’s an important message for our age. So much catch as catch-can thought, grasping the simplest literal understanding of the Bible, focusing the narrowest most obscure and restrictive commandments and making them crucial. As the tumult rages, a quiet, gentle voice sounds across the centuries. *You shall love God with all your mind.*

To serve God wittily is to cut through the tangle of jumbled reasoning of our times and find the true thread of faith which binds both our best scholarship and the highest devotion to God’s service.

**You shall love God with all your mind.**

## Strength

My first pastorate, which I began as a student, was Cheltenham and Befountain, two villages north of Brampton. Shortly before Mae and I arrived the Cheltenham Baptist Church burned to the ground and the people were left with no church home. I arrived to be the rector of a gaping hole in the ground. All that summer we watched and shared the people’s planning to build a new church to maintain their witness, which had lasted over a hundred years. They laboured at meetings, meticulously planning the new building. They laboured in the hot, summer sun raising rafters and nailing planks. They served God with all their strength. But the strength was more than physical. It was strength of the spirit too for they were deeply discouraged by loss of their beloved church home. They banded together, gathered their resources and began to rebuild. We arrived in May of that year and in the following spring Dr. Nathaniel Harrington Parker preached the first sermon in their new church.

**You shall serve God with all your strength.**

What is the greatest commandment. The answer – sure and direct.  
*You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.*  
And the second added to it, the corollary that connects faith to our world  
*You shall love your neighbour as you love yourself.*

The demand on Christians to love others is a whole other sermon.  
But I must take a moment to mention that Luke tells us that the lawyer adds a supplementary question, *Who is my neighbour?* and Jesús's answer is the parable of the good Samaritan. We all know that parable but do we fully understand what it means for us? Who is this neighbour I must love as I love myself? Not the wealthy, the accomplished, the successful, the beautiful people. Our neighbour is the homeless man living in a makeshift tent at Gore Park, the bag lady aimlessly walking the streets, the single mom with three children wondering where she can get winter clothes for them. We have many such neighbours.

*In haunts of wretchedness and need,  
on shadowed thresholds dark with fears,  
from paths where hide the lures of greed,  
we catch the vision of Christ's tears.*

**You shall love your neighbour as yourself.**

Thinking back on it, I have a memory to cherish, the memory of holding the Torah, the foundation of our faith tradition, holding it close, opening my heart and mind and soul to the inbreathing spirit of God that dwells in that sacred scroll. Holding the scroll, so antiquated, so fragile and yet so beautiful, holding that physical object, I became aware that my relation to it was sacramental. Just as breaking the bread and pouring the wine parts, for a moment, the veil drawn between the spiritual and the tangible, just so the Torah, the physical scroll in the spools and parchment, is a door, a passage, opening the spiritual presence of God to my soul. 3000 years of history were gone in an instant and I stood with Ezra, the Scribe in the ruins of old Jerusalem holding in my arms the Torah, which would be the centre of guidance, nurture and unity to the people of God across the centuries.  
I hugged the Torah and God of Abraham and Isaiah, and Ezra,  
and the God of Jesus was with me.

**In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer  
Amen .**