

Essential Christianity

Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34

“Love is the essence of Christian living. It is also its...*sine qua non* in every conceivable connection. Wherever the Christian life in commission or omission is good before God, the good thing about it is love.”ⁱ

Ever wondered about how you would sum up your faith? Ever felt tongue-tied in the face of some genuine, or hostile question from someone who asks you, “But what do you **really** believe?” Ever feel you’ve got something of an idea about what you believe but you just can’t quite get the words? Here it is. Best source of all – Jesus of Nazareth, quoting from the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall 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 second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

“Western culture has in modern times tended increasingly towards anthropocentrism. (We put ourselves first)...We use the Bible and God to achieve desired psychological states or to attain moral ends which, on a variety of grounds, we perceive to be good.” Whereas what these few verses spoken by Jesus tell us something quite different.

We are, first of all, to love God with everything that we have, and everything that we are. When did you last love God with all your heart? With passion and with warmth. I know, it’s Morningside and we don’t do passion. Maybe that’s where we have an issue. To love God with all our hearts, with our passion – what would that mean for you? What would it mean for the Church and for the community that we serve. Imagine what they might say as they walked by and pointed: “There’s Morningside Parish Church, where they love God with all their hearts.” To

love God with all our hearts would be to love the things, the people, the ways of God, and to put the feelings into practice.

“There’s Morningside Parish Church, where they love God with all their souls.” Is this a place that is also somewhere for people to come and find out and experience and participate in the spiritual side of life? I am more and more convinced that, despite people’s unwillingness to commit to organisations, and organised religion, yet still there is a hunger for the spiritual side of life. People yearn for meaning, they long for significance; they ache to be part, somehow, of something bigger than themselves. Is this a place, are we a people, that love God with all our souls? A theologian once said that every Christian, in however primitive or rudimentary a way, can and must be a theologian. Every Christian needs to find words and thoughts that are natural to them as they try to express what God means to them and why believing in God matters so much.ⁱⁱ

“There’s Morningside Parish Church, where they love God with all their mind.” Do we really think about what we believe, and also, when we put our thoughts into action, think about why we do what we do, as well as how we do what we do? That’s a question for this Church, and its leaders. But it’s also a question for every member sitting in the pew. We might not be great philosophers or theologians, but God gave us the gift of a brain, and expects each one of us to use it.

“There’s Morningside Parish Church, where they love God with all their strength.” How strong is your love for God? I wonder if that has to do with the nature of your commitment. Do you consciously make a decision to commit part of your time, or your talent, or indeed your money, to what you believe God wants done. Is it something that you set as one of your priorities? It’s an area where, with rival calls on our energy and strength, that many of us find difficult. There are so many paths to choose, so many alternatives are available to us. Somehow, God, and

God's Church, gets pushed further and further down the list. And those people outside – pointing – maybe they don't see the strength of our love for God.

Until tragedy strikes. My colleague Ewen Gilchrist is the parish minister of Cults in Aberdeenshire. Can you even begin to imagine what he, and his congregation and church, and his community, have gone through in the passed week? But that church has remained open, for days now, available to anybody who needed sanctuary, or healing, or simply a quiet place to rest.

"We don't want to fill the vigil time with words," Ewen Gilchrist said ahead of the vigil where hundreds were to come. "We won't tell people what to feel or what to think. But we do want to provide a safe and healing place where people can bring their hurt, their bewilderment, their questions, their sadness and even their anger."

That, I believe, is what parish churches at their best can do and be. Demonstrating what it is to love God with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength. And by parish churches, I don't mean simply the ministers and elders. I mean the people. For churches are made up of the people who worship there. Weak and strong, faithful and doubting, committed and half-hearted, in-with-the-bricks and occasional visitors. But somehow feeling that need to connect. Could they say that of us, here? I believe they can, but we have to keep working at it.

So, says Jesus, "*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*"

That's a great answer. That's a brilliant answer to anyone who asks you about what your faith is, about what you believe in, about why your faith matters to you. But He doesn't stop there. He goes on. Also from the Old Testament. '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*'

If you love God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – that’s brilliant – but all that love has to go somewhere and has to do something and to be something. It has to find a focus. Just as the ‘faith focus’ goes beyond the individual to God, so the ‘practice focus’ goes beyond the individual to our neighbour. Faith and practice, hand in hand, complete what it means to be a Christian, a follower and friend of Jesus of Nazareth. Faith and practice mingle together to create love.

This saying of Jesus isn’t simply about asking ‘What is love of God and neighbour?’ It is, ‘Where is love of God and neighbour present?’ The love of God and neighbour isn’t simply a wonderful idea, it is a present reality practised by the Church, and the people of the Church, every day.

Today is All Saints day, where in some traditions the emphasis is on giving thanks to all of those people in the past whose energy and dynamism and piety and love have enabled us to have faith. That’s good. But let me attempt to go one better. Remember that person standing outside our Church saying, ‘There’s Morningside Parish Church’? Maybe they might add something like this, ‘There’s Morningside Parish Church, and it’s full of saints.’ Well, there’s a thought. We might think it’s full of sinners. In fact, both are true.

God is nothing if not creative. He does something wonderful. He creates saints out of sinners.ⁱⁱⁱ Nelson Mandela once said, “I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.

Essential Christianity is practised by people who maybe sinners, but they keep on trying, and will find themselves, much to their embarrassment, amusement, or astonishment, saints. Essential Christianity reaches towards God, and reaches towards our neighbours. And it reaches with love. The charity workers; the coffee makers; the car lift givers; the child carers; the music makers; the property maintainers; the meeting goers; the leaflet deliverers; the hand

shakers; maybe even the sermon deliverers! Sinners – working towards being saints, practisers of essential Christianity. Living the love of God through service towards others.

Our whole church life is oriented towards offering to God, living life in God's presence, loving our neighbours as ourselves. It's all about love. It's **always** about love. And **that's** what it means to be an essential Christian, today, and every day.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 1/2 p 372

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1 p765

ⁱⁱⁱ Søren Kierkegaard, The Journals of Kierkegaard