

Sermon 4-11-18 Magdalen: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 12:28-34

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the people to remember who they are and the relationships they have.

To remember who they are: their identity, but that their identity is defined by their relationship to YHWH, to the Lord God. This identity and the relationships it depends on are expressed in the statutes and ordinances, the Law, which the people have been given to live by.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

This is so much their identity that they are to bind it to their hand, and on their forehead and place it on the doorposts of their houses. This will remind them to remember how real relationships, knowledge of one another, mutual support and living with one another, are the ground, the foundation and definition of their existence, who they are. It will remind them also that they believe that the most real of their relationships, the most enduring and reliable, the firmest foundation of their identity, is in the Lord their God.

We look to find our identity in a whole host of places – as someone’s friend, as a student of a particular subject, in sport or the arts, in music, as a scientist or a doctor, a historian or a philosopher, as a husband or wife, as a parent, as a priest. Today there is a lot of worry that by seeking to find our identity in the way we express ourselves on Twitter and other social media we are somehow losing the shape our lives should have, losing a foothold in reality: creating false identities, and ones we can’t rely on. Indeed, Twitter is so good at creating false identities that 10,000 accounts were shut on Friday that had been set up to try and persuade Democrats not to vote in the American mid-terms. In July it was reported that 70 million fake and suspicious Twitter accounts had been shut worldwide. Is there much difference between someone seeking to create an image of themselves that is false, and a Twitter bot creating a false impression that someone is actually there?

Moses is telling the people to find their identity in their heart, in the way in which they live out their lives, out of the richness and abundance of their heart, and in the reality of the actual relationships they share with one another and at the core of their being with the Lord their God. To find their identity not in what they do, but in what they deeply believe – and, he says, *if* you do this your days will be long in the land God is giving you – you will be blessed and enabled to live in a way that is good for you and the people around you.

Moses is reminding the people where the power and ability come from to achieve anything, and that the power and ability needed come from within, from the core of each person’s being. He is reminding us of that to. It’s not what we do with our hands that defines who we are – whether it’s tweeting or anything else – it is, in a sense, why we do it, what motivates us, who we are in our deepest core. And *that* is defined by our relationships to each other and to God.

Christians believe that God is at the core of our being, giving us existence and sustaining our lives. And we believe that the key to remembering that is to remind ourselves of exactly the teaching we heard again as our Gospel reading: that we are called to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. These are beliefs which defined Moses’ identity and in a unique way they defined Jesus’s identity too. Jesus and his friend the scribe are remembering together, in the conversation they have, how this is so, reminding each other of what it means: that we need to allow our hearts to define what we do.

But there’s a very obvious paradox here, or confusion: because what we do also helps to define who we are. Our actions create our relationships, and they give shape to our lives. We can’t separate who we are from what we do, or what we do from who we are. But there is an answer to this paradox or confusion and it’s to think of our lives as virtuous circles. The virtuous circle which reinforces its own good outcomes is a concept we can use in social policy or economics, and in trying to work out how to fund a university in fact. The virtuous circle we need to get into is one which builds ourselves up as people whose very nature is to live in a way which is good for us and for the people around us.

Memory is one critical way to make that happen, as Moses is pointing out to the people in our reading from Deuteronomy and as Jesus and the scribe are reminding each other in our Gospel reading. Remembrance is a special form of memory – a kind of active making present of the past, whether its remembering all the saints, or all the souls we have lost as at the Requiem here on Friday, or all the fallen as next week on Remembrance Day. Indeed, the point of calling people saints – whether saints of the past or the saints of our own day – is to remind us how to live well, in a way which is good for ourselves and the other people of our world. This now is a time of remembrance and recognition – remembrance of the past, our own remembering of who we are and what we most deeply believe; and recognition of the people we live with, the real relationships we have, and of people who live or have lived truthful lives that help us to understand ourselves and our present time, and to ready ourselves for the future. Amen.