

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 25, 2016, at the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC. Text: Matthew 22: 40, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

We call these two commandments the Summary of the Law. This kind of summary is a favourite Jewish method of teaching. We sum up the heart of religion.

Moses gave 613 commandments; David reduced them to 11, in Ps. 15: 2-5. Isaiah reduced them to 6 (Isa. 33: 15); Micah to 3 (Mic. 6: 8), Amos to 2 (Amos 5: 4) & Habbakuk to 1 (Hab. 2: 4, “the righteous shall live by his faith.”). The Golden Rule is another example of such a summary, and James 1: 27 is another: “religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Rabbi Akiba, who was martyred about 135 AD, said that Lev. 19: 18 was the great principle of the Law: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. The whole verse reads “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The Summary of the Law, in the Prayer Book on p. 69, is a combination of two scriptures, Deut. 6: 5 & Lev. 19:18. Deut. 6: 5 reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” In Jewish tradition this is known as the Shema, from the first word in Hebrew, “shema,” which means “Hear.” Lev. 19: 18 is: “you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Of the 613 commandments in the Mosaic law, 365 are negative, and 248 positive. They all point to how we should live in the presence of a holy God. They all give voice to how God made the world to be lived in. They reveal how a perfect son of God would live. They are the DNA of creation. They are the underlying essence of divine order. You could say that God’s Law is the way the universe is, it is what reality is, as God intends it. And so we are to cherish God’s Law. Psalm 119 was written by someone in love with God’s Law, someone in love with God through His Law. Psalm 119 has been called the Rosary of the Psalter, a song of devotion, gratitude and love for God’s Torah, God’s Word, His commandments, His precepts, His statutes, His testimonies, His ordinances, His law. We can exclaim with joy, “God, I like your style.”

So the Shema is truth in a nutshell. Teaching with truth in a nutshell is having pegs to hang your hat on. Our young people need two pegs to hang their lives on. With them they can, as it were, thread their needles in God’s kingdom: the Gospel in one sentence, and the aim of the Christian life. Do you have a way of

summing up the Gospel in one sentence? There are numerous ways to do this. Do you know the aim, the purpose, of being a Christian?

Our young people, and we all, need three historical pegs to hang our hats on: knowledge of three great Christians from whom so much today derives: the 6th century Father of Christian Europe, the 9th century Father of England, and the 20th century defender of Christian civilization.

So here is a principle of skeletal frameworks, and of putting flesh on them as time goes on.

Now there is a downside to this method of learning, and Jesus was supremely aware of it. It is called reductionism: reducing God and the things of God to fit our narrow, or narcissistic, or idolatrous categories. In today's Gospel, after Jesus answers the lawyer's question, he asks the Pharisees a question. "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?" The Pharisees reduce the Christ to a comfortable category, and they answer, "The son of David." Jesus then says to them, "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord," and He quotes from Psalm 110, and breaks open the Pharisees version of a Christ they can control.

As God becomes more real, He becomes less tame. Jesus is before Abraham, a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. He is David's Lord, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. We cannot box Him in. He is bigger, vastly more huge, than our categories and simplifications.

The Law and its Summary belongs to Him, because He is the eternal embodiment of it. He is the Law incarnate. The Law is our awakener, the schoolmaster which brings us to Christ. The Law brings us to poverty of spirit and the light of the Gospel. The Law shows our heart of stone, and points to the Rock of Salvation. The Gospel is that Jesus the Christ is the embodiment of the Law. By letting Him live His life in us, so that we live our lives in Him, His Holy Spirit is constantly planting and cultivating the Law in our hearts. When God's Law is inscribed in the hearts of a people, in a state and in a nation, very few external laws are needed, and government can be kept small. This was the view of our founding fathers, and indeed, of the three historical figures cited above.

Who were they, by the way? The 6th century Father of Christian Europe is St. Benedict, whose monasteries put together a new Christian civilization after the collapse of Rome. The 9th century Father of England is King Alfred the Great, who defeated the barbarian Viking invaders and led in their conversion. The 20th century statesmen who saved the Christian West was Winston Churchill.

Knowing who we are as a free and God-fearing people means knowing something about these three men, from young adulthood onwards.

What is the Gospel in one word? Jesus. Jesus alone. The Gospel in one sentence is John 3: 16, which we use at every Mass, on page 76 of the Prayer Book. What is, one phrase, the aim of the Christian life? To attain Christ. And we attain Christ, or let Christ attain us, by receiving the Holy Spirit.

What is the Summary of the Law? The Shema, on page 69, uttered by the perfect Israelite, who knows to keep things simple for us, who gives us pegs to hang our hats on. He knows what sinners we are, so He agreed to die in the place of sinners, and make Calvary the Rock of Salvation for all men. His Resurrection reveals Him as the life of all life, life restored as love. This life of His is what we were baptized and confirmed into. Today, at this Altar Rail, the Blood of the Atonement cleanses all repentant sinners and brings us oxygen and spiritual nourishment for continual growth, growth that will go on forever, in unshakeable confidence in the love and victory of God.