

God be in my head and in my understanding

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FIRST of all, as is the custom where I come from, thank you for inviting me to your pulpit and I bring you all greetings from the Methodist people of Derby.

God be in my head and in my understanding; God be in my mouth and in my speaking.

I have taken as my text for this afternoon one of the verses from the Gospel reading that we have just heard – Luke 10.27, but just one part of it, because if we looked at the whole verse we would need the rest of this week. So: the lawyer says to Jesus, “Love the Lord your God with all your mind.”

Now if you think back to the Old Testament reading, ‘mind’ does not appear in that reading. So there is a difference between the great commandment in the Old Testament and in the New. Why? Well, we have to have a little Hebrew anatomy lesson at this point, because in Hebrew you thought with your heart. If you had a broken heart, you had bowel trouble, translating the Hebrew literally. So when you have the word ‘heart’, it actually means your mind. Loving with all you heart means loving with all your mind. The Gospel is going out into a non-Hebraic culture and so that had to be spelt out. So they put that in, as it were, in brackets: you loved the Lord your God with your mind.

What did Jesus say about this? If we look at Mark’s Gospel, in chapter twelve Jesus himself gives the summary of the law and speaks of loving the Lord with all your mind, but it is in chapter seven that he is talking with the lawyers. He says, “out of the heart proceeds everything that defiles a man. For out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness” and so on; we know that list very well.

St Paul takes up exactly the same list when he is writing to the Galatians about contrasting lifestyles. We much more usually quote the second half of what Paul has to say, as he lists the fruits of the Spirit. But it should not be read without the first half, which is more or less the very same list as given by Jesus when he

was teaching the lawyers. Paul says of his list, “These are the works of the flesh” and observes that these are things that come out of the human mind. If you then go on to look at the second part of Paul’s list – that is the one that we encourage children to learn – you see that the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control – are not just counterbalances to the first. They are the direct opposites. It is very interesting when you work with children to get them to write out the opposite of the second list. All these years later, and they come very close to the first one, indeed the list of Jesus in Mark chapter seven.

This gives us a very good picture of our current lifestyle, only it has all been re-branded. What do I mean by that? Well, for instance, a well-known commandment says, “Thou shalt not covet.” But what does that mean to the advertising industry? In our current lifestyle, there is nothing wrong with coveting, because it is an economic virtue to be a keen consumer. So now our old ideas of what are the fruits of the Spirit and what are vices have all been re-branded. The fact that we have to face today is that the things that we thought were standards are now prejudices. What St Paul describes as the works of the flesh is now absolutely fine – fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, strife, jealousy, anger, dissension, party spirit – all that stuff. That is our current lifestyle. And look at the mess we are in.

The trouble is that we have all been too nice about it, and not naming things for what they are. You can tell Satan’s hand in this re-branding exercise that has taken us all in. Throughout the Scriptures Satan is described as the great deceiver. In Revelation 12 he is thrown down, so that he can deceive people no more. But you have to be very careful in these politically correct times over how you identify people and what they are involved in; but we must nevertheless remember that our current lifestyle as promoted in the press and television, all these things that we are supposed to aspire to, are exactly what Jesus says comes out of the human mind and defiles us.

Now what of the opposite? In Galatians 5 we have this wonderful list, the fruit of the Spirit. So the image is of a tree. Such a clear image as that resonates through the Bible. One of the great things about doing “Whole Bible Studies” is that it is a bit like disentangling tapestry work and how, occasionally, the wool gets into a bit of a mess and you undo it by pulling it; you find where it moves the other side

of the heap and eventually you pull it through. You can do just the same with Biblical images. You say, “Where does all this come from?” Well, the fruit of the Spirit comes from the story of the Garden of Eden. There, Adam’s first mistake was disobedience, but disobedience in a particular way. He is asked to choose between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What sort of knowledge really was that? Adam was tempted by Satan, making his first appearance as deceiver. The snake, of course, is the symbol of wisdom, so he uses that disguise to sow confusion, saying, “There’s another wisdom; try this way instead.” Wisdom has been re-branded and the result is that Adam and Eve reject the tree of life, the symbol of the greatest and deepest wisdom of all. They chose the wrong tree. And what are the fruits of the tree of life that they miss? They are love and joy and peace and so on – the list of St Paul in Galatians 5.

Now, looking further into this, another of the lovely images that does not appear in the Bible as such, but that you can trace all the way around the edges, is that the anointing oil for the prophets and the kings and so forth was actually the oil that was expressed from the tree of life. Now you don’t want logical people saying, “How does that work?” It is an image - you express oil from the tree of life and when you have done that you anoint people with it and the result is that it changes their minds. That is why, when the High Priests were anointed, they were anointed on their foreheads and also on their eyelids—because it opened their eyes. Now the most famous picture we have of this is in Isaiah 11. You all know it very well. “There shall come forth a shoot, from the stump of Jesse. A branch shall grow out of his roots, the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” So, the manifold Spirit: that is one way of looking at it.

But if you look at that Spirit-filled person in Isaiah 11, he is rather different from some of the “spirit-filled people” we find nowadays, going round making prophecies, doing all sorts of things, which may be all to the good; but we have to bear in mind that the first effect of the Spirit in Isaiah is on the human mind. The Spirit changes your mind. When you have the gift of the Spirit, you get the gift of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might knowledge and the fear of the Lord—that changes your mind. It changes the way you see things. “If you want to change what you see, you have to change how you see it” – a very old truism. We know this is all a reference to being anointed with the holy anointing oil from the tree of life,

because the third verse says, “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord”. That verse is one of those interesting places where everyone has got so used to – and has come to accept – a wrong translation; because the commonest meaning for the Hebrew word that lies underneath “delight” is actually “perfume”. So it should really be translated as, “His perfume shall be the fear of the Lord”.

Why? Because he has been anointed with the perfumed oil from the tree of life. All these threads weave themselves together and they underlie some very familiar passages. So when you hear mention of “the fragrance of Christ” – the expression Paul uses – it is the same thing. It means your mind has been changed. You think differently. You see differently. You are beginning to love the Lord with your mind.

In the world in which we live, we have a knowledge-based economy. That belongs to one tree and what we need is a bit of wisdom – from the tree of life. If you think of some of that great disasters of our time, not so much the environmental disasters, but those that occur in the systems and world that we have made, they are not caused by ignorance – it is very good managers who manage these messes – it is because they are managed with some different end in view than wisdom and life. If all those people, however, had the idea of “loving God with their mind”, we might have a very different world.

One of the stories I sometimes tell concerns the different educational background of me and my son. My son read engineering. If somebody came to me, gave me a box of bits and said, “Will you make me a bomb?”, I would have no idea what to do. But if someone came to my son, even as an impecunious student, with the same box of bits, he wouldn’t do it; but he would know how to. So my son has not just knowledge, he has wisdom.

It makes me ask, “How do we steward our creation? How do we steward our talents? How do we love God with our minds?” Satan is the great deceiver and he is having so many of our values re-branded. You can hear him in the mouths of those otherwise nice people who say, “You don’t still believe that, do you?”

I can give you another example. I started teaching Religious Education many years ago and one of the things we covered in Personal and Social Education was something called “drug abuse”. Now that same syllabus talks of “drug use”: two letters, and a complete change of attitude. So when we look at this text in Luke (or

indeed in Mark and Matthew – it’s in all of them) – “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart and soul, and mind and strength”, it is as striking now as it was when it had to be spelt out by the Jews for the Gentiles, loving God with your mind is the most difficult thing.

It is no mere coincidence that, in Jewish angelology, Satan is in charge of corrupting the human mind. The Jews in the time of Jesus had a system of patron saints, if you like, and certain angels were in charge of certain things; and the chief of the fallen angels was in charge of corrupting the human mind. G.K.Chesterton famously said that the devil’s greatest triumph is to convince people he does not exist. His clever re-branding of what constitutes a good human lifestyle, of what is good and wise for human life, is part of the same “wonderful” triumph. So think about it. What does it mean, “Love God with all your mind”?