SERMON: ST LEONARD'S DENMARK,
SUNDAY OCTOBER 11th,
Twentieth after Pentecost; Nineteenth after Trinity

Deut.34:1-12
Ps 90:1-6; 13-17
1 Thess.2:1-13
Mt.22:34-46

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit…

I have to begin with a confession. I love the Star Wars spin-off show *The Mandalorian*. The subject of this is a lone member of a military order, the Mandalorians, who liVe by a complex code of ethics. They cannot, for example, ever take off their helmets. If asked to explain any of these rules, they respond with a simple answer: "This is the way." Traditionally, I think, this is how a lot of people treat Scripture: that the Bible is, in itself, a wholly undifferentiated expression of objective truth. A very dear friend of mine once remarked over dinner that he had no need for any other source of authority. "The Bible," he said, "is my manual for life."

So when we come to a question such as we find in today's gospel reading "Rabbi, which is the greatest commandment in the Torah?", it has the capacity to catch us immediately off guard, because Jesus' response is not to reject the premise of the question and answer that they are all the same (I wonder if that was the answer for which our tricky lawyer was fishing), but to go with it and cite two texts, one from Deuteronomy, the other from Leviticus, and bring them together in such a way as to elucidate what the Law is about in the first place.

There are two really interesting points that I find here. The first lies in the way in which Jesus uses scripture. It's not really the done thing to find two quite different proof texts, stitch them together, and then say that's what the Law says. Jesus doesn't do all of the things that we are trained to do today. He doesn't look at composition or audience; he has no feeling for the texture of the text; he doesn't even try to situate these two verses (actually a verse and a half) from two different books in their varying contexts. He just takes the words and uses them to answer a question.

I wonder how much that affects our approach to Scripture. Jesus was careless of all the things that we are careful about. When we insist certain things about the authority and the inspiration of Scripture, we miss the implicit point that Jesus is making here: that the

Scriptures are there to serve our needs, to be profitable to us for every good work. Article Six of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican faith says it very well:

HOLY Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation

We have the advantage over the Jews of Jesus' time in that we have copies of our scriptures freely available to anyone who can read. Jesus' own culture combines the orality of parables told to crowds with the literacy of Torah scrolls read to synagogue congregations. Our problem is that texts are too available; there are just too many of them: too many versions; too many translations; too many paraphrases. And then there's all of the literature about them. There's a mountain of commentaries on individual books of scripture, written by different hands, in different contexts over the past eighteen hundred years or so. Even before the canon of scripture was settled, people were writing commentaries. And then there are the works of theology – the commentaries on the commentaries. Of making many books there is no end, and of much study, says the Teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is a great weariness (12:12). And that was written about 2400 years ago.

So this necessarily raises the question of how we read Scripture: the questions that we ask and why we ask them. This framework of interpretation is what is called hermeneutics and it constitutes a whole field of philosophical inquiry. Hermeneutics is the study of ways of reading. It is an endeavour to provide a way of describing how we read and the kinds of assumptions that we bring to our reading. At the end of the last century, the French Protestant philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, coined the term "hermeneutics of suspicion" to describe the way in which texts are principally read in the contemporary world. Drawing on the work of Marx and Freud and Neitzsche, he argues that these "masters of suspicion", as he calls them, have persuaded many scholars that texts are ideological documents to be decoded. This includes the Bible and much Biblical criticism has been conducted along these lines. It is the basis of the historical-critical method of reading the text, in which I was trained; and also of intertextuality, the method in which contemporary students tend to be trained. There has also been in Biblical criticism, and by way of contrast, a hermeneutic of literalism: a view that reading the Bible ought not to be difficult and so the surface meaning, the "plain meaning" is all that there is to find. That is what my friend was saying to me over dinner: that the text of the Bible that is in front of us is sufficient for being read as a comprehensive manual for life. Here, there is

no suspicion, neither of the text itself, nor of those who claim to be able to read it for us. Instead, there is a kind of credulity dressed up as reading.

The thing is that what Jesus was talking about here was hermeneutics. He was talking about how you read texts. He was giving us a lesson in interpretation. It is no accident that this question came here from a lawyer, the profession most concerned with the creation and interpretation of authoritative texts, whether laws, deeds, contracts, wills or the like. When Jesus says "on these two hang all the law and the prophets" – that is, these two commandments - he is identifying them as the essential hermeneutic key to everything else. Jesus is not just answering a lawyer here; he is telling us how to read scripture. And the key to all of this, it turns out, is love: love for God; love for one's neighbour and love for oneself.

This is the hermeneutic that matters: the question that needs to be asked. How do we read any text within the context of divine love: our love for God and God's consuming love for us. We are forgiven creatures who lives and fortunes are the gift of a gracious and loving God. Our only valid response to that is given in the command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind", which means that our reading must be a loving reading, particularly towards those singled out in the second half of Jesus' statement: our neighbours and ourselves. That is what I mean by a hermeneutic of love.

This week, our nation has been shocked by an act of rage and hate. The sheer violence of the act and the damage that it has wrought reminds us that hatred creates nothing. Communities are constructed through love and hope. Jesus' hermeneutic of love is not just about how we read texts, but how we deal with one another. There is another side to what happened in Wangaratta this week. Within four hours of the attack on Helen Haines, Wangaratta Cathedral was full of people praying for her. Literally full. So full that they ran out of candles. It only seems tragic that it takes such an act of reckless hate for a community to pour out the depths of its love.

In our own world of endless texts, Jesus' words here provide us with a solid ground on which to read and live. They offer us a proper transfiguration of our reading of texts from the dull or bitter interpretations and questions that the world asks into a holy and creative reading of the Bible. Ask yourself, what questions do you ask of the text when you read the Bible? And then ask this: how does my reading affect me? If it makes me less loving, less gracious, less accepting it is not a good reading. If it is a reading that tryrannises others, then it is not a good reading. If it is a reading that hurts and even kills

others, then it is not a good reading. It is not how Jesus read the text or lived his life. So we must challenge ourselves constantly not to fall into legalism or cynicism or fury, but instead to read and live with love, in love and through love.

This is the way.

The Lord be with you…