

Sermon for Confirmation at Christ Church Vienna

It is a great pleasure to be with you here at Christ Church Vienna. I am delighted to be confirming our candidates from Vienna, from the Tyrol and from Budapest. It is also a particular pleasure to be baptizing two candidates - Valerie and Aysun. This is a very special day for you and your families.

Baptism is an exciting and important event: it marks and symbolises your entry into the Christian faith. Confirmation is a ceremony of initiation that is rooted in and uses the same affirmations as baptism. My own confirmation was 50 years ago. But I still remember it well. It was a key moment marking my growth and development as a Christian. And I hope all of you will also remember today for many years to come.

I enjoyed reading the biographies that you sent me via Patrick. I noticed that Hannah started coming back to church through having her banns read for a church wedding. Harry also became interested in confirmation into the Anglican church through a discussion with a priest about his wedding ceremony. And that reminded me that it is not unusual that people find their faith awakened, or their membership of the church strengthened, through some significant life event, through thinking about the commitments entailed in marriage or through experiencing the welcome and love of the Christian community.

Love is at the centre of Christian life. In our gospel reading today, a scribe asks Jesus: 'what is the greatest commandment'? Depending on how you count them, there are 613 commandments in the Bible.

And the question of how the commandments related to each other and which of them was the most important was apparently a common topic amongst the scholars at the time of Jesus.

Actually, when Jesus replies he doesn't give one answer, he gives two answers. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. This double command is where the centre of our Christian religion lies. And Jesus words are such an important summary that it's worth spending a few minutes thinking about them.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind...and anything else you can think of." Where does Jesus get this answer from? The words are from Deuteronomy chapter 6, our first reading today, and the beginning of the Jewish *Shema*. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." There are almost no words in the Bible which were and are more important to a religious Jew than these. A good Jew says them when he gets up and when he goes to bed. He strives to make them the last words he utters at the moment of his death. They are the heart of Jewish monotheism.

The Shema is linked to the first of the 10 commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me." This first commandment explains the next three commands: don't make idols, don't blaspheme, keep the Sabbath holy. To love God means to honour him, to respect his name, to be devoted to him. Most importantly it means not to allow any others gods or idols to take his rightful place at the centre of our lives. Love the one true God with all your heart. The greatest

commandment, says Jesus, is the first commandment, and its elaboration in the Shema.

Jesus then links this great command to a second command: “love your neighbour as yourself.” This command sums up the second half of the 10 commandments: “don’t bear false witness, honour your parents, don’t steal, don’t murder, don’t covet...and yes, don’t commit adultery.” Neighbour love is an attitude in which we value and respect other people and do all we can to work for their benefit and wellbeing.

Love of God is the vertical dimension. Love of neighbour is the horizontal dimension. And Jesus joins these two together. We show that we love God by loving our neighbour. And we can love our neighbour only because God gives us the strength and motivation to do so. Then Jesus moves ‘love’ to the centre stage of spirituality and ethics. It was always there in the Old Testament. But now it is at the centre. For Jesus: “love is the fulfilment of the law”.

Now it’s worth pondering why it is that “love” should be so important. Particularly in our society, where love has become a rather lightweight word, why does Jesus say that love is absolutely central. Perhaps important at the outset to mention that our word ‘love’ covers two Greek words with different fields of meaning: ‘agape’ and ‘eros’, and it is ‘agape’ that is referenced here. Nonetheless, you could say that God is good, he is all-knowing, he is all-powerful and that is all true. So why is it the most important feature in the Christian understanding of God that God is love?

We might find a clue, in the way that a new born baby begins to relate to its parents. To begin with a baby responds only a little to its mother, or its father. Then after a mother has cradled and smiled at her baby for a few weeks, there comes a moment when the baby begins to smile back. The mother awakens love in the baby’s heart. Out of the great blur of impressions surrounding it, the baby begins to notice circles, eyes, a mouth.

Little by little the baby starts to recognise and know the mother, through the loving interaction that she has initiated. So it is in the same way that God makes himself known to us. We gradually get to know God not as the end point of a set of intellectual questions – anymore than a baby gets to know its parents by using rational argument. It is, rather, that God reveals himself to us, by communicating his love. It is as we experience his love, that God begins to make sense for us. And so, very often, people come to know God through the love of a marriage partner, through the wonder of a new baby, or through the welcome of a Christian community: through an experience ultimately of God’s love.

‘We come to God not by navigation but by love’ (Augustine of Hippo).

God invites us into a relationship of love in which we are bound vertically to him and horizontally to our neighbours. I think this is an extraordinarily wonderful way to live. It is the way we were intended to live. And it is this way of life into which you are being immersed in baptism and confirmation. You will pledge your love for God in a series of commitments. You will be welcomed into the love of the Christian community. And we will pray for God in Christ to fill you with his love by the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Sadly and unfortunately, this is a way of life which in the West is now difficult for many people to understand and which is becoming counter-cultural. Because many people have grown accustomed to a way of life which instead of having *God* at the centre, has *self* at the centre. Selfism has replaced Judeo-Christian monotheism. In the selfist life, my rights, my pleasure, my development, my personal space and my money are the things that give meaning. In this sort of life, binding relationships to God and to neighbours feel like an imposition, like a threat. They feel like competitors for *my things*.

That seems to me a tragic mistake. Because it is our relationships, ultimately, which make life meaningful and worthwhile. Without relationships we are isolated, lonely, individuals. Only in relationship with others do we become true human persons. And only in relationship with God is our humanity properly fulfilled.

So today, in your baptism, in your confirmation: I invite you, I invite all of us, to know afresh God's deep love for us, and to respond in lives lived in love for God and love for others. However that might be and wherever you may go.

And finally...dear candidates...today, God lays his hand upon you in a particular way. He calls you by name and reassures you that you are his. Our young candidates are full of potential. None of us knows

what the future holds. It may be filled with sunshine and real achievement. We hope so. But there may be darker days. If and when those come, I hope you will be able to look back to today as a time when you knew for sure God's hand upon your life, that you can say: yes at Christ Church Vienna in 2024 I felt and knew in a special and powerful way the love of God and his people for me.