We come to the end of the long season the Church calls Trinity Season with the greatest of all commandments ringing in our ears:

Jesus says, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The problem with texts like this is it seems so simple to say, and it’s no doubt familiar to all of us, but it in fact pretty difficult to actually live out in our daily lives.

The first section about loving God is from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy actually says ‘with heart and soul and strength’, Matthew says ‘heart and soul and mind’, Mark and Luke have all four: heart, soul, strength and mind’. The meaning is the same: Love God with all that we have, with all that we are, with all that we can be.

And then the second commandment which comes from Leviticus is more practical. ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself’, which follows as passage about helping those who are weak, honesty in daily life, and living justly and with integrity.

Let’s be honest. These are not easy commands. Loving God with all our mind, soul, strength and heart. If you are anything like me then there are days when we intellectually doubt God is real; days when we might turn up at Church just because that’s what we do but our heart’s not in it; day’s when we are so tired in our-selves that we have just enough strength to get through the day, let alone make sure we’re loving God with all of it.

And then loving our neighbour as ourself. Sounds simple enough, Love our neighbour - and we all know the Parable of the Good Samaritan when was asked who our neighbour should include – basically all those in need. But loving those close to us and those we generally like is hard enough, but when we need to include those in need, and those who are difficult, and those who are irritating, those who we dislike, then it gets more difficult.
I was writing this sermon on Friday, determined to get it finished so I could take a full day off on Saturday and people get getting in the way. A friend with depression wanted to pop in for a chat. A student needed some support. I found myself grumbling to myself that I just needed space away from them to think about loving God and neighbour.

The problem with passages like this is that we can read them and feel pretty rubbish about ourselves because, frankly, we realise we haven’t loved God with all, our heart, all our mind, all our soul… and no doubt we haven’t loved our neighbours as ourselves either.

Today is Reformation Sunday and this week we celebrate 500 years since Luther pinned his 95 Theses on the door of All Saint’s Church in Wittenburg, and so it’s fitting to see what Luther has to say about this passage. Quite a lot in fact.

In a sermon, which was significantly longer than this one will be you’ll be pleased to hear, he said:

Who can live up to this? Christ said: If you love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,……namely: when everything you do, whether you wake or sleep, whether you labor or stand idle, whether you eat or drink, is directed and done out of love to God from the heart. In like manner your mind and thoughts will also be directed wholly and entirely to God, so that you will approve of nothing you are not certain is pleasing to God. Yea, where are those who do this?¹

And about his neighbour he’s also similarly pessimistic:

And indeed, nowhere will you find a person who loves his neighbour as himself. It may indeed happen that two companions live friendly together; but even there hypocrisy is hidden, which continues until you are wounded by him; then you will see how you love him, and whether you are flesh or spirit. This commandment therefore requires me to be friendly with all my heart to him who has offended me; but when do I do this?²

He was perhaps a bit of a curmudgeon, but we can understand where he’s coming from.

Luther was steeped in a church where you could literally earn your way into salvation. John Tetzel was selling indulgencies in return for an immediate release from Purgatory, and the life of the pious believer was a gruelling discipline of prayer and works which he felt he constantly failed in unfulfilling.

¹ http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_5.pdf
² http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_5.pdf
What Luther’s main point in his sermon 500 years or so ago, which is absolutely relevant for us today, is that if we begin with this command, and treat it as if it is a law:

**You must love** the lord with all your heart, mind, strength and neighbour as yourself’ and then God will be happy with you and accept you. Then we will never achieve it.

Luther’s transformation came when he realised that our relationship with God wasn’t dependent on our good work, but was a gift of God through grace.

The works lens sees the world one way: if you work hard enough, be pious enough, love each other enough, commit to the Church enough, pay enough indulgencies to the authorities, then God will love you and accept you and you will be saved.

Whereas the lens of Grace looks at everything in the opposite way. It turns it all on its head. It begins with ‘you are loved and saved through Jesus’, then moves to acceptance, affirmation and then from that wells up a capacity to love; both God and others.

I heard a lovely story of a family with an adopted child who had huge behavioural problems. They were going to have a half term trip to Alton Towers, a big Adventure resort. Child huge tantrums, hit other children. A day before said to parents ‘I’m not going to get to go am I’. Realised behaviour didn’t deserve the treat. Parents determined to go as a family and took the child. Behaviour no better and day was really difficult. At the end of the day, when tucking child to bed he said ‘I didn’t get to go on the trip because I was good did I, I went because I was your child’.

That, is grace.

The unconditional, unearned, undeserved love of God, poured out on us at our baptism, and enabling us to live out that love in the world.

It is from that starting point of love that we come back to today and are reminded of once again.

When we recognise we are beloved and accepted, not because of how good we are, but because of how good God is, then we begin to turn to look at everything differently.

Luther’s first of his 95 Theses was his most famous:
It states, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."³

Repentance is literally to turn around, and to change direction. We repent when we change direction from trying to earn God’s love and acceptance to living as a response to Grace, to the unconditional love and acceptance we’ve received as a gift, freely given to us, even though we don’t deserve it. The movement in our relationship to God is always from God to us. Always. We can’t, through our own holiness or goodness, move closer to God. God is always coming near to us, most especially through the Eucharist which we are about to share, and through the stranger, through the poor and needy. We repent when we turn towards that love.

Someone wrote of this passage that it is ‘simple to say without even taking a breath but utterly absorbing to live out, claiming every breath we take’.

So let us continue live our lives in response to the love of God with every breath we have. The commands can’t be separated as to love God is to love God’s people, and so let us love God with all our being and our neighbour as ourselves, however difficult and costly that might be, or however weak and curmudgeonly we might feel.

Yesterday I dropped a huge bag full of socks, pants, scarves and gloves off to be taken from this community to be given to refugees in Calais and they are being given today, as we meet here for worship.

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.. and love your neighbour as yourself.

We’ve already begun, and go out from here to continue to do so.

³ http://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html