

WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN 2012

David Merritt 8 January 2012

Are there particular experiences you have had that stick in your mind not because they are big events or really matter very much but just because they involved you in an odd way?

Many years ago I was invited to talk to a large group of teenagers about the adventure camp I helped to start. Knowing I had to get and keep their attention I told some pretty interesting stories about sleeping in tents, canoeing across the Gippsland Lakes, cooking great meals over open fires, sleeping under the stars – and how you made great friends, and discovered new things about yourself.

When I finished the person chairing the meeting asked if anyone would like to ask a question. And the hands shot up! That was a great feeling! I had actually got through to them! I pointed to a boy in the front row.

He said, “Mister, why does your watch have two winders?”

I can still remember the sudden sinking feeling. I had a chunky watch with a separate winder for an alarm. What was of interest to him was not what the program was about.

It was like watching those station promotion ads on ABC TV where the person with the bat hits the beautiful coloured bubble and it collapses in hundreds of bits.

Of course I have often done what he did – let my attention wander to something at the edge of what is going on. And that doesn't matter much unless what is going on is my life.

Many of us have times when we know we have not focussed on what is important to us. Something happens to a child or partner or friend and we wish we had given them more time or more attention or used our

time or money differently that would have made a difference. At other times we can have a sense of satisfaction that what we have done has made a difference – through our friendship, our love, our help, our money.

I thought that a few minutes thinking about what is important for us in 2012 would be a good topic for this second Sunday in the new year.

A lot of Jesus' teaching was about what is important. Particularly he asked questions and told stories to stir people to think for themselves about what was important for them.

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew says Jesus looked over the impressive city of Jerusalem and was sad as he thought about the people there - their religious history and how often they had turned away from opportunities to do the right thing, to welcome what was actually important for their well-being. How many opportunities had been missed! Matthew wrote his gospel not many years after the city and its great temple were destroyed by the Roman army in the year 70 AD. So writing about Jesus' sadness at the missed opportunities would have been very thought provoking for his readers.

At another time Jesus told a story of a rich farmer who was doing very well, His crops were so good he put great effort into building bigger barns to store the harvests and then planned to live it up with a life of ease and luxury but he neglected other people and what was important for his life. In that story Jesus said that God called him a fool. “Tonight you will die and who will get what you have stored up. This is what happens to people who store up everything for themselves but are poor in the sight of God”. (Luke 12: 16 ff)

In the Gospel reading we heard this morning, a man asked Jesus what was really important in life. “What is the most important commandment?”

Now that was a question by a Jewish religious expert to a Jewish teacher in the country of the Jewish people. They had plenty of guides to how you were to live. Their scriptures – the books we call the Old Testament – were packed with commandments and instructions for every aspect of life, Not just the 10 commandments but literally hundreds of commandments.

The famous Jewish philosopher Rabbi Maimonides who lived in the 12th C made a list of 613 commandments he found in the Jewish Bible. If you want to read them type “Jewish commandments” into your internet search engine and the 613 will be listed with the place in the Bible where they are given. So the man asking Jesus the question about the commandment wasn’t short of options! He was actually trained in knowing the options.

What he wanted was priorities. What is really important?

Nearby was the great Temple of Jerusalem with its rituals and sacrifices and money offerings that made a huge claim on the lives of people of faith.

[So that was a big question: What is really important?](#)

[It is a fascinating conversation! Listen to it again:](#)

Mark 12: 26 – 34

The summary that Jesus commended was:

There is only one God – so I think that encompasses all religions not just ours.

**Wholehearted and intelligent love of God
and love for others equal to your love for yourself.
And that is more important than religious practices.**

[Jesus called this “A sensible answer” that showed that this Jewish religious leader was close to expressing the way of life God wanted.](#)

I was tempted to stop at this point and say I spent too long browsing the 613 commandments in the Jewish Bible and will have to leave it to you to apply to your own life the answer Jesus gave.

But that would be ducking the important question for me: What does Jesus answer mean for me? And I think that if I use the word “God” it is reasonable in Australia in 2012 to be expected to say what I mean by “God” as there are people using that word with strange and sometimes horrifying meanings.

Jesus gave his answer about what is important to a Jewish audience in the little, largely Jewish, country of Judea, where his people were oppressed by the ruthless occupying Roman army.

Jesus and his audience shared a common reference for what he meant by God, and how they understood the world. That common understanding was in their bible – what we call the Old Testament. They viewed the world through religious eyes. Most people in Australia today and most of us don’t have a detailed knowledge of the Bible and don’t use religious thinking in most of our everyday lives.

I heard a story

We I don’t share the religious worldview of people in the first century. They viewed the Jewish people as privileged by God and that their history and scriptures defined God.

[I don’t share that belief.](#)

They thought that what happened in the natural world and to people, from sickness and rain to the rise and fall of nations was the will of God.

[I don’t share that view.](#)

Like the writers of many of our hymns, they thought they were God’s special people and that God would care for them in a special way.

[I can’t share that view.](#)

They saw their small nation as central in thinking about God and their religion as the definitive truth about God, and other religions as untrue. [I can't share their view.](#)

For me: This planet home of ours evolved 3 b years ago as part of our complex huge 34 b year old universe. Amazingly diverse life has evolved on this planet and includes the evolution of us humans just a few hundred thousand years ago to be the first creatures with minds to begin to understand ourselves and the world around us.

Down through the centuries people have wondered at the universe and life. They have told stories and created religions to express that wonder and to recognise that mystery – the Spirit in all things. I have been shaped by the Christian religion with Jesus and his Jewish heritage as its source. But Jesus is the source for me of a way of looking at the world which opens our hearts and minds to a mystery and a hope beyond beliefs about Jesus.

[Now I think religion is about being open to the mystery that is beyond words to describe or beliefs to contain. To love God is to open our hearts and minds to what Jesus expressed which is beyond the boundaries of Christianity.](#)

[To love God with all of heart and mind is to know we do not know ultimate reality but live with hope and commit ourselves to putting into practice compassion and justice. Our guide is to love for other people as much as we love ourselves.](#)

And for us Christians in Australia at the start of 2012 we do not have 613 written commandments to start with when we think about priorities. If you read that list, there aren't very many of them you would acknowledge today as appropriate or compelling. Some of them were not ethically compelling when they were expressed 25 centuries ago. I certainly would not want to call them "the Word of God".

When we think about our own lives, we will think about how much we give attention to what is most important for us ... in our everyday relationships, .. in our work activities ... how much our church can encourage openness to new possibilities, ways of being Christian that are right for other people but may make us uncomfortable, and we will welcome other religions ...

When we think about our wider relationships as Australians we see much that is hopeful and generous – and much that stirs us to wonder about what is important - our messy party politics, our shameful failures of justice and compassion for desperate people seeking shelter in our land, the poverty of some aboriginal people, the selfish grabs for huge salaries by some CEOs, the needs of too many people in our cities for shelter and food and care, so-called entertainment that bombards us with encouragement to be selfish and consume as much of the earth's resources as we can ... the possibility that greed will destroy what is needed for sustainable life on our planet ... the list goes on.

[You will probably have some different aspects of life in 2012 to consider in light of what Jesus said was most important.](#)

We might end up with today's list of hundreds of commandments that someone is urging us to follow.

[And we will come back to the question about priorities: what is most important for us?](#)

Jesus points us to answers that are about

[Wholehearted and intelligent love of God as the mystery expressed in the universe and in all life and shown in love for others equal to your love for yourself.](#)

[As was true for Jesus, it won't have much to do with religious beliefs or practices. But it will give us a spiritual compass to show the way.](#)

Our priorities are not likely to be much about what happens in church. But what happens in church can make us sensitive to priorities for the human spirit - important aspects of life that the secular commercial world largely ignores, aspects of life that are about what makes us whole in body and mind and spirit.

What is important for you in 2012?

Music for reflection

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