

We've all become very wary now of those phone calls which begin with 'May I speak to the person who is in charge of your gas and electricity?' and goes on to say 'We're not trying to sell you anything but you could save yourself a lot of money by switching suppliers' and so on – the foot in the door pressure to make a sale of whatever it might be. And many people regard Christianity in this light also – what are you really after? You don't care for me at all. What you're after is another scalp to add to your trophy pile. You want my conversion not for my sake but for the sake of the church, so there are more people like you keeping the show on the road, and so on. But our first duty is not the conversion of others. Our first duty is love; love of God, love of neighbour, love of self – and these not as three separate operations but as one command. So in this sense our first duty is not conversion of others but the continual conversion of ourselves. Today's gospel passage is the third in a series of questions which the Scribes and Pharisees are asking Jesus in order to test his orthodoxy, his right to belong to their church – but their church too, the faith of Israel, is not about conformity to the law but conformity to love – as the scribe today readily realises. There is a beautiful story in the First Rule of St Francis of how to go about mission – fleshing out the idea of preaching the Good News but using words only if you have to. Francis is preparing his friars to go out on mission to the Saracens:

'There are two ways in which the friars who go out can act with spiritual effect. The first is not to dispute or be contentious but for the love of the Lord to bow to every human authority and to acknowledge themselves Christians. The other way, whenever they think it to be God's will, is to proclaim the Word of God and their faith in God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit....'

The first way is the way of accepting others as they are, of recognising that, whatever their beliefs, they too are made in God's image and likeness, created good however much they may have fallen away from that image and likeness since – and in this respect, just like us. So we are sinners reaching out to sinners in love and quite possibly learning more of God, more of love's possibilities, from them as from our own community, family, church. God speaks to us through everyone. What Francis is recognising is the essential goodness, not only in all people, but in all creation. This is what should give courage to his friars, and to us, in our dealings with others including our enemies and the non-human world with which we now seem to be at odds. For this to be so though we need to speak to the person who is in charge of our supply of love – the one God who makes all things possible, who is that love that moves the sun and the moon, the stars and the planets – and who needs no sacrifices from us to turn that supply of love on or off. It's a given, constant, unconditional. Christ is the one sacrifice already made and significant of God's eternal love. It's only our conversion of self to this ready supply of love which will convert others. Or not, they may not need it.

Br John Mayhead  
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour