During the week I was listening to the news on the radio and a speaker was talking about how communities have responded to the pandemic; he mentioned the role of churches and said that the ‘church of God had become the church of good’. That got me thinking. Is there a difference? How is the church perceived? Should the church be doing good things in the eyes of society, or should it be a place that is distinctive and offers something that is different, other, holy, a sanctuary? It seems that churches have to be both a place of good, where it interacts with its community in helpful and relevant ways, and also a place where people can take refuge and be spiritually nourished. To be a church of good and a church of God depends on how we develop our relationships.

The 2nd century theologian Iraneaus said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”  This is not something that happens to you on the road to Damascus, or the day you are baptized, or even if you felt some experience of being spiritually born again.  It is a daily relationship, an awareness that we live and move and have our being in God.  But living in a loving relationship with God is not easy.

How do I love God?  I’m still working on loving people.  I can give a hug, I can say “I love you,” and get the reply “I love you too.”  I can pray to God and say “I love you,” but I have no real feedback on how that lands.  It is hard for me to even speak of what kind of being God is, let alone express a love of the ineffable, beyond all knowing, being called God.

Jesus offers some help in the Gospel passage.  Loving God and loving humans is not only similar, it is all actually one thing.  Love your neighbour as yourself.  They are God’s creation too.  God is pleased when you love what God also loves.  Any way you put more love out into the world, you are loving God.  As Jesus said, whenever you give even a cup a cold water, you did it to me.

Jesus is quoting straight from Leviticus 19:18, which is a commentary on the 10 Commandments.  Leviticus says to be holy, don’t take vengeance on others, don’t hold a grudge, don’t profit by the blood of your neighbour, don’t slander people, but love your neighbour as yourself - because you are one, and if you hurt them you have damaged the fabric of life itself.

This is simple, basic, practical and mystical all at the same time.  Writers of law in the OT seem to have believed that it was possible to be mystical and pragmatic. You’ll notice that all these things are about living in a good relationships with others.

This is more than having the right ethics, finding the right ideology, voting in the right way, volunteering, though all these may be done with love.  Being in good relationship with one another is about a passion for the well-being for others, for of all life, and acting upon it.

In the late 1800's in the US, a small town businessman from a remote Baptist community in North Carolina went to a large city and there for the first time in his life, he saw an ice-making machine - a recent invention; he thought this was wonderful because it meant you could have ice all summer long. He returned to his small community and told his Baptist church about this great new invention. Within a month the church had split into ice and no-ice Baptists. The theological issue in this case being is it a violation of the natural order established by God to make ice ‘out of season’. ‘If God had wanted us to have ice in the summertime, God would have raised the freezing temperature of water’ seems to have been the argument.

Christians get concerned about believing the right things: infant baptism versus adult baptism etc so that sometimes we have made being Christian very complex, as if it's about getting our doctrines right.

Whenever we get lost in the labyrinth of complex moral issues, frustrations, deep questions, the Great Commandment is where we return.  It grounds us again in the deep oneness of God’s love permeating our being.

When Jesus was cornered and confronted with people using his religion against him, his response was that loving God and loving one’s neighbour and loving oneself, is the highest calling in life. The hope here is that he didn’t let the struggle with the local leaders break his spirit or distract him from the core of his message. This threefold love is the measure against which all Christians measure their lives. It is the heart of the Gospel.