The question posed to Jesus in today’s gospel is not a surprising one. The Mosaic Law contained so many commandments and prescriptions of various kinds that teachers of it were often asked, which commandment was the first, which one offered as it were a key for our understanding of the others.

In responding, Jesus chooses not one but two commandments. The first has to do with our relationship with God while the second speaks of the way we relate to one another. The link which joins the two and, in the end, makes of them a single commandment, is love. In each case Jesus’ answer takes the form of a quotation from the Old Testament, in the first case from the book of Deuteronomy and in the second from the Book of Leviticus.

Love is something which we both understand and, in many ways, don’t really understand. It takes many forms – the mutual love of spouses, love of parents for children and of children for parents, love of siblings and friends, romantic and sexual love.

Love is both simple and complex. We have all encountered or at least read or heard about remarkable acts of love. It might have been a person donating an organ for a family member or someone who risked and perhaps even lost their life in attempting to save a person who was drowning or who was trapped in a burning house. We see remarkable examples of love on an everyday basis in the care of grown children for elderly parents or of a mother for her children especially for any of them who might be severely handicapped. The examples of such love are all but endless.

Jesus offers his own example of love of neighbour in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The mere sight of the state of the man who has fallen among robbers inspires the Samaritan to act and, in doing so, to cross religious and ethnic boundaries.

The love of which Jesus speaks is not primarily an emotion or a feeling of empathy. It can and often does include such things, but its focus is on action, on doing something positive for someone else, especially someone in need.

The more intimate a love is, the more complex it can be. This is particularly true of relations between parents and children. The love that often marks that relationship can have a profound and positive impact on our other loves, including our love of God. It can also, unfortunately, have the opposite effect.

I have always found it particularly challenging to understand what it means to love God and, above all, to love him with all my heart and soul, mind and strength, to love him, in other words, with the whole of my being. Unlike the neighbour whom we can see and respond to in so many ways, God remains for us invisible, a mystery the nature of which we can barely begin to grasp. It is striking that the New Testament rarely speaks of our love for God. What it emphasizes is his love for us and our trust and faith in him.

The first letter of John declares that God is love. “Beloved,” John says, “let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” He then adds, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his only Son (for our salvation.)… Since God loved us so much,” he concludes, “we also ought to love one another.”

That love of neighbour can lead us to the love of God has become increasingly important in the secular environment in which we live. To love others in the full biblical sense of that word is to open ourselves to the power of love. Once it enters into and expands our heart, we become increasingly capable of love, including the love of God.

Love is at the heart of what the Mass is all about. In the Eucharistic prayer we remember and give thanks for the love by which Jesus gave himself for us unto death on the cross. In communion, the sacrament of love, the Eucharist draws us into the mystery of the divine/human love that marked the entire life of Jesus. “I have come,” he once said, “not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for the many.” At the Last Supper, Jesus repeated and deepened his teaching about love when he said to the disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

It is easy to fall in love. It is a great deal more challenging to love with a love which grows and deepens and which enables us to confront and overcome the challenges that genuine love inevitably faces. The more we grow in love of one another, the more capable we become of experiencing God’s love for us and of learning to love him in return.