

Love God and neighbour

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As part of the process for exploring if you might be called to ministry, the Church of England gives you a table with various criteria on it. You have to show you have potential in each of them. Now the Church being what it is, these criteria are rather vague. They include: 'wisdom'. 'Fruitfulness'. 'Potential'. I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to show I have the potential to have potential, but there we are.

They also include, crucially, 'love for people' and 'love for God'. And it struck me that these were aspects of my life that I took for granted, but hadn't really thought deeply about.

What would it mean to say that I have a love for people? I try and be nice to people and see the good in them but to be honest a lot of people are very annoying.

And more challengingly, what would it mean to say that I love God? What does that actually look like, in my life?

Our gospel reading today points us to these questions. The Pharisees are trying to question Jesus' authority. And they ask him a trick question: "what's the greatest commandment?" It was thought there were 613 commandments that Jews had to follow. If Jesus singled out one, they could accuse him of downplaying the rest.

Jesus says to them: if you want to understand the law and the prophets, all the stories of the Israelites, you need to read them through the lens of two core commandments, which the people tried and failed and tried again to keep. "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", he says: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

We know this passage so well we can take it for granted. But loving God and loving neighbour are not at all easy. They don't just happen automatically; they

take work. This gospel invites us to ask: what does it mean to love God and to love neighbour? What might it look like in our lives?

The context of the commandments can help us here.

When Jesus calls us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, he's quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy. It would have been well-known to his Jewish listeners, because the sentence before it is called the *Shema*, which is effectively the Hebrew statement of faith.

"Hear, o Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one."¹ The Lord is one. The command to love God comes straight after the declaration that there's only one God. There are no other gods; so there's nothing else that should command our deepest loyalty and praise.

So when the Israelites are commanded to love God, they're being asked to give the one Creator their undivided loyalty. They're being asked to put aside anything that gets in the way of relationship with God; any false idols they might be tempted to worship.

As with them, so with us.

For us, part of loving God means self-examination. It means asking where our deepest loyalties lie, and where we may be following idols. Often we put too much self-esteem into things we think will fulfil us but never really do. Work; money; success; even relationships – if we're not careful, all these can become idols that get in the way of our relationship with God.

Loving God means trying to cultivate a *desire*, a *longing* for God. We can do this by creating habits of quiet prayer, where we simply sit and be with God, and allow God to build that longing for him in our hearts.

And loving God means actively trying to listen to how God wants us to live; and being prepared to change.

To love God, says Jesus, we need to strive for him with all our being. That is the first commandment.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

And Jesus says a second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Again this command isn’t new; it comes from the Book of Leviticus, which we heard in our first reading.²

What does it mean to love neighbours as ourselves?

It’s not just about being nice, and warm fuzzy feelings. It’s not even about ‘live and let live’, which is really the default in our society – let people live as they want as long as they don’t harm others. To *love* our neighbours as ourselves is much more demanding than that.

In Leviticus, the context is clear that loving neighbour is, in part, about actively working for justice. Alongside the command to love neighbour are commands not to steal; not to deal falsely or lie; not to hold on to hate or take vengeance; commands to forgive, and care for outsiders.

Loving neighbour means to challenge oppressive structures, that prevent people from flourishing as God intends them to flourish.

Loving neighbour is to be filled with compassion for another person. To enter into relationship with them; to give something of ourselves to them, whether that be time, energy, or resources.

And we’re called to love neighbour as *ourselves*. We’re called, too, to love ourselves. If we are to love others, we need to recognise that we too are worthy of love and are loved by God.

To love neighbours as ourselves is not a new commandment. But Jesus does reinterpret it, in a crucial way.

The Israelites tended to understand it as meaning they should love their own people. People like them. But Jesus showed the true way to understand it. Our true neighbour is everyone, everywhere – because everyone is made in the image of God.

That includes those we like, and those we don’t. In fact, our neighbour includes our enemies. Jesus tells his followers: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”.³

² Leviticus 19:18

³ Matthew 5:44

Again it's not about fuzzy feelings. To love our enemies means to refuse to return hate for hate. To refuse to dehumanise those who dehumanise us.

And it's not about turning a blind eye to wrongdoing. When people do wrong, or evil things, loving them involves calling them to change; to see the wrong they've done and repent. It's about wanting them to flourish in the way that *God* wants them to flourish. Loving and seeking justice and reconciliation go hand in hand.

It's only love that can break the cycle of hatred and violence of the world. Only love, and only love, and only love.

But it is so hard. Love is costly. It takes sacrifice. And for those of us who have been hurt, to love enemies can seem impossible. Sometimes, all we can do is turn to God, and pray God to love where we cannot. That prayer, in itself, is loving.

Love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus says these commandments go hand in hand. They're two sides of the same coin. When a human loves a neighbour, they're also loving God, whether they know it or not – because they're loving someone made in God's image. To love God we need to love our neighbour whom God has made.

When Jesus calls us to this path, he's calling us to *become like God* – because it is God who loves first. It is *God* who first loves *us* with all God's heart and soul and mind. It is *God* who loves us, his *neighbours*, as he loves himself. It is *God* who pours himself out for us on the cross, who in Jesus suffers and dies and rises for us, who gives everything of himself for us.

What does it mean to love God and love neighbour? It means to imitate the one who loves us first; to become like him; to become who we are meant to be.

Amen.