

Sermon 29/10/17 – Love your neighbour

Prayer

Phew I thought – a nice simple one – should only need a 2 minute sermon! “Do as you would be done by” - love others as you would like to be loved - with the clear understanding in today’s society that the test of whether I am being loving, is whether you “feel” loved as a result! So all I need to do is to do things that will make you feel warm and cared for, I certainly shouldn’t challenge or offend you, I need to be nice, and I will be living as God commanded – Simple!! Sermon done!!

Or is it?? Perhaps we’d better look a little deeper at what was going on in the gospel – was Jesus really just giving us a simple command to be nice?

Let’s begin with what’s going on. These chapters of Matthew’s gospel are a series of debates between Jesus and the various religious authorities at the time, [conducted in the public square with the crowd listening in – the equivalent in its day of a debate on TV or social media I suppose]. The authorities are “testing” Jesus, trying to trap him into saying something that they could seize on as either blasphemous (offending Jewish law) or treacherous (offending Roman law), and so lock him away or kill him. Jesus has just silenced the Sadducees, and so a bunch of Pharisees step up to try catch him out. “What’s the most important commandment then??” [Actually, this was a pretty common area of debate among Rabbis of the day. There are 613 commands or laws in the Torah, and much time was spent in arguing about precedence and order – it was a key aspect of being “religious”. If Jesus were to dismiss some aspect as being unimportant then they’d got him!]

The first part of Jesus response would be familiar words to every Jewish believer, both then and now - it is taken from the ‘Shema’, the prayer Jews say as they wake up in the morning, and again as they go to sleep at the end of the day: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

Then Jesus quotes a verse from the middle of a passage from Leviticus parts of which we also had read to us this morning, and he goes on to say “on these hang all the law and the prophets”. Jesus is not here stating that these are more important than every other law, to do so would have been to fall into the trap set by the Pharisees, but rather that these two describe the principles upon which all the other laws, and indeed the teaching of the prophets, depend.

This idea of understanding the principle, rather than the letter of the law, is really important in understanding how Old Testament law was originally interpreted. The laws, of which in the Leviticus passage we heard earlier is just a small snippet, is a fairly random collection of “laws” which were intended not so much to apply to specific situations, but to illustrate and illuminate key principles of God’s commands to his people. So it’s important that we note the first words from Leviticus 19 to get to the principle in which all the various commands of that chapter are set, and those words are “Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy”. The whole chapter is a call to live Holy lives, because in so doing we will reveal something of God’s true nature.

There’s a really key point in here – asked about precedence in the laws or commandments, Jesus points straight to God, and says in effect: “Look at both the holiness and the love of God”, and then reflect these. Focus your whole being on God, who is One and Holy, and from this will flow love for all.

Let’s dig into this a bit. God’s reason for calling the Israelite nation and giving them laws was not because they were somehow better than others, it was to be a living sign to all people of who God is – to be a living parable that shows the world the character and nature of God. God calls us, the church, the bride of Christ, in the same way to go out and be living signs of His kingdom, not because we are particularly special, but because he wants everyone to come to understand His full nature – to come into a relationship with him.

God’s purpose, his longing, is to bring each of us back into relationship with him. That’s why he chose the people of Israel to be a living example, and why he sent his son Jesus to bring us back – it’s all about God wanting, longing, aching to have us in relationship with him.

So it seems to me that instead of worrying about whether the recipient “feels loved”, the test of loving needs to be “does it reflect God’s nature of love?” – that puts a whole lot higher call on us than “Do as you would be done by!”

So what does God’s love look like – hmm, this sermon suddenly got a whole lot more meaty! I’d like to suggest three things which I’ll try and unpack a bit.

First, God’s love is entirely generated by Him – it flows out because of his nature, not because of ours. We are not intrinsically particularly loveable! [I happen to think Liz my wife is loveable, she’s warm, caring, and fun to be with, so I might choose to love her because of those qualities. But] God’s love doesn’t depend on me being loveable – He loves simply because of who *He* is. That’s why he reaches out to every one of us with compassion in his heart and tears in his eyes, and longs to give each one a hug regardless of our status, our beauty or any other quality we care to name. If he reaches out like that to me, then perhaps the call to me to love others is the same – love that reaches out without regard to the loveability of the other – no wonder that Jesus taught not only to love our friends, but our enemies as well – that is the nature of God’s longing to be in relationship with us – I wonder if I can really show that nature of love?

Secondly God’s love crosses boundaries. This flows from God’s holiness. God’s holiness isn’t some sanctimonious piety – it is that he is exalted, awesome in power, glorious in appearance, pure in character – it is this that sets him apart from the universe he has created. And if God is holy, is set apart and above everything else, then he must cross the boundary with his love to reach us – he comes from within himself to touch us. It is this desire, this willingness, to go across the boundaries that characterises God’s love. In the Gospel Jesus is frequently criticised for eating with tax collectors and sinners – he crosses the social boundaries. [In fact, if you look carefully Jesus never invites people to come to him to eat – rather he goes out to them. Sure he serves the last supper to his friends, and cooks breakfast for them after the resurrection, but his habit, his mission, was to go out to where people were, not invite them in to where he is.] Does my love cross boundaries? Am I willing to go to where people are, not just physically, but socially and emotionally? Am I willing to get involved in the mess of their lives rather than invite them in to the seeming order of mine?

And thirdly God's love calls for a response, for repentance. God's love isn't about saying "there there" and "it will be alright", or "poor you". God's love, and Jesus action and words, always challenge us to change our ways of thinking and behaving. Whether it was just in his very presence, like the way Zacchaeus repents of his greedy tax collecting when Jesus simply comes for supper, or whether it's like the rich young man who cannot bring himself to surrender to God's call on his life, there is always a challenge to change. Do you think the rich young man left "feeling loved?" – had he got a warm fuzzy feeling that "Jesus was really nice to me?" I don't think so – Jesus love challenged and called us closer to a holy God – that's a rather different test to whether the recipient "feels good" as a result.

So it seems to me that this little passage which is so familiar, isn't quite as "Simple" as I first thought! Jesus starts from where his listeners are, and reminds them of words they say every morning and night – words which remind them of the holiness of God – how separate and infinitely above everything in creation he is. And then from out of that holiness he calls us to reflect God's love in how we relate to others. We are called to be set apart, to be Holy, and the nature, the character we are to show is to be love, because says Jesus, that is at the heart of who God is. This is key.

That love is first of all self-generating – it's an act of will that reaches out to those who I consider unlovely – loving my Christian friends here in church is fine, but this is a call to reach out to those I don't like - the bully confronting my child, the youth lost in a haze of drugs that wants to hit out in his brokenness, to Mr or Mrs Angry who believes that the church and Christianity is to blame for many of the ills in the world – all these and more I am to love without regard for the cost.

That love compels me not only to invite others in to my love, but to get out there and seek them out – to go where they are physically, spiritually and emotionally. Here in St Michaels Liz and I really enjoy the opportunities we have to work with those preparing to be married – we often joke that we are blessed with the chance to work with the "young, happy, and in love people" – and that's great. But truly loving calls me also to walk with those who are in darkness. We have really good friends, a couple 10 years younger than us, who in the past five weeks have discovered that she has a very aggressive brain tumour – she has already had massive surgery that has had an impact a bit like a stroke, and will shortly begin radio and chemo therapy. Lots of their friends are gathering round with positive thoughts and

messages to encourage her to “win the battle” and for him to “stay strong”. But as I pray, and as I talk with him, I know that to love is to enter into his darkness, to give him the chance to talk with me about his loneliness, his terror at the road ahead, to cry with him, and to grieve with him as he faces up to the fact that he is living through the last months and weeks of life of his deepest and closest companion, the true soulmate of his life. I don’t want to go there – everything in me shies away, and wants to pour out happy, hopeful platitudes – but God’s love calls us to go into the darkness and pain – that was what Jesus did on the cross, and it’s the cost of loving God’s way.

And God’s kind of love challenges. I may feel compassion for the homeless, the hungry, the broken, the listless and the downtrodden, but am I firstly willing to recognise that I have to change first if the system is going to change? I may want the best for my children or grandchildren, the latest gadgets, this season’s toy or clothes, the right brand of trainers, but what does that signal to the kids of the single mum on benefits who is struggling to put food on their table? Am I being loving when I let my kids go round to friends where I know they will be watching unsuitable films or playing unsuitable games, or should I be challenging the parents about the values that such things normalise, and explaining why I have said no to my children? Whenever I reflect on God’s love it brings me back to the foot of the cross, realising my own brokenness and failure to reflect his holiness – does my behaviour do the same with others, or do I just offer the world “nice platitudes”?

I’m quite sure all of us will, in some way or another respond to Christ’s call to love our neighbour this week. The issue is whether that just involves being “nice” so that the recipient “feels loved”, or whether we hear his call as one rooted in God’s holiness, and a call to love his way – loving the unlovely, reaching out into the mess of life, challenging to change, and revealing God’s character - will you love that way this week?