

## Love God... Love your neighbour as yourself

A very warm welcome to the baptismal party, to Heidi's parents Joannie and Oliver and their wider family. Et bienvenue à nos visiteurs français.

It's fitting for a baptism that our Gospel reading gives a very short summary of the two most important commandments. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself'. How simple! Well, let's take the second one first, 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

I spectacularly failed to do this yesterday when I was hurrying to take a group of students on a pilgrimage by train to Canterbury.

Taking a group of students anywhere is more frustrating than children or adults: with adults you can assume they'll sort themselves out; with children, you can at least make them all hold hands in a line... But taking a group of students anywhere is like trying to herd cats.

Inevitably, several students failed to turn up on time, so hurriedly we split the group and I went ahead (trying next to find another student who had decided to ignore the instructions to meet outside the station and was on the platform already).

Looking frantically up and down the platform for the lost student whilst stood beside the waiting train, four boisterous males in the thirties decided that this was the moment to engage the frazzled looking vicar. "More tea vicar?", one bellowed. "How long have you been a vicar?". To be fair to me, I don't think this was a serious pastoral encounter, so my comment "Go away, I'm busy" wasn't the worst thing I could have said (especially when I consider the other possibilities did float through my mind). But as the men walked away, they jeered "That's why we don't go to church!". It was a wonderfully calculated barb!

Love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus is deeply infuriating, isn't he?

And this was just a small encounter, with one kind of 'neighbour'; but how does a person even begin to try to love the neighbour who lives in a country that has just attacked theirs?

On the one hand, I just can't imagine how peace will come to the Middle East; but on the other hand, I can't imagine how peace will come *unless* groups of people beginning to treat their neighbours as they themselves would want to be treated. In a very real sense, in this second commandment Jesus puts his finger right on the heart of the matter. Love your neighbour as you love yourself.

In another place, of course, Jesus is asked to define who the neighbour is and he famously does so by telling the story of the Good Samaritan: the neighbour in that story turns out to be someone from an enemy tribe. Which means, we Christians are asked to avoid demonising the 'other', whoever the other is; to learn to see things as if we were standing in their shoes. It's a tough call, it requires patience and curiosity, holding our tongue, suspending judgment. Let's be honest, it can be incredibly difficult.

At the same time, the call to love a neighbour as we love ourselves implies that we do actually love *ourselves*. I've spent over two decades in pastoral ministry, listening to unhappy, exhausted people of a good heart who have taken on too much responsibility. They are often women; they are often engaged in multiple acts of volunteering or caring for several others; they are often riddled with guilt that they are not doing enough. And when I invite them to stop and consider what they would like for themselves, the desires they express are pitifully small.

If Jesus asks us to put ourselves in our neighbour's shoes, he also assumes that we can imagine that the good things that our neighbours might enjoy are allowed to us, too.

So, yes, there is a place and a time to sacrifice our desires in order to meet another's. But as someone once wisely said to me: Jesus didn't fling himself at *every* cross; on the contrary he had a lot of time apparently

enjoying himself being fed as a guest. I think there are more dinner parties in the Gospels than crucifixions. Do we, then, make time to be fed, too?

So: we are to love our neighbour *as* we love ourselves, not instead of. Jesus wisely yokes *our* needs to the needs of our neighbour. The moral destination of faith is not the creation of a community of embittered doormats: it is an empowered, careful community, whose acts of self-sacrifice flow out of a sense that it is loved and valued. We love, because we have received love.

Which takes me to the first commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart... I think of these two commandments as axes on a graph: vertical and horizontal: they map out a space into which we the Christian, like Heidi, is invited to grow – expanding on both fronts.

And these two axes seem to me to be related: being in a whole-hearted relationship with God creates the grounds from which a right love of self and love of neighbour grows. It's very hard to love ourselves, and our infuriating neighbours, if we haven't also allowed space to be in the love of God.

So, let me finish by asking: how do you enter, experience, receive and return the love of God?

In my often-hurried schedule, I have found helpful a very short tip from the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola. Which I'd like to share with you now. Joannie and Oliver, it might be the kind of thing you teach Heidi as she grows. It's quite simple.

Before entering any other more serious kind of prayer, Ignatius suggests that we first pause for about a minute, and in that minute, he says: simply allow the God who loves you to take a good look at you, to see you as you are.

Sometimes I update Ignatius' metaphor and imagine sitting under God, as if under the warm glow of a lamp; at other times, I imagine that I become like a pane of glass and allow the light of God to pass through me. To finish, I'd like to give you a moment to try that simply experience.

Take a deep breath. Get comfy in your seat; and if you want close, or just half-close, your eyes. And now, if you can, allow the God who really loves you, to take a good look. Maybe imagine sitting under the warm glow of God; or becoming that pane of glass. IN whatever way you can, let God see you, and rest in that gaze.

Thank you for trying that. Maybe, doing something like that, will free you up both to love yourself as you could, and your neighbour, too. Amen.

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