# Loving God, neighbour AND self

Sermon preached by Bishop Jo for the Diocese of Guildford 27th October 2020

**Matt 22:34-46**

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ 37He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

*41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ 43He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,
44 “The Lord said to my Lord,
‘Sit at my right hand,
   until I put your enemies under your feet’ ”?
45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.*

I wonder if you’ve ever been in a situation where someone asks for help, at a moment when you’ve nothing left to give. You find yourself replying, ‘I’m sorry, I just can’t come over right now’ – not because you’ve anything in the diary, but in order to get a bit of time to yourself. Which you end up spending in a tussle of emotional exhaustion and nagging guilt. Because ‘you’re supposed to be a Christian’ – as if that means teetering on the edge of physical burnout, psychological manipulation and relentless guilt. We act as if torn between just two options – altruism or selfishness - living for others, or living for myself. Whereas today’s gospel, I think, offers us a third way. Jesus talks about self love.

“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus is asked. And he replies, “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: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Jesus is asked for one commandment and he answers with two – the first from Deuteronomy, the second from Leviticus.. And then urges three objects for our loving: God, neighbour, and self. Let’s move through each of these as we seek to hold them together, as we explore how to juggle them.

First our loving starts with God – suggesting, perhaps, we won’t grasp what it means to love unless we begin with God. Notice Jesus says “Love the *Lord your God*.” Hear each of those words, words which are utterly foundational to the Old Testament. This isn’t a distant abstract God who set the universe in motion and then took a long lunch break. This is the *Lord*. That’s the God whose name was so holy they couldn’t say it out loud, whose face was so wondrous they couldn’t look upon it, whose heart was so passionate they wrote book after book about his constancy in the face of Israel’s faltering response. And this Lord is *your* God. The whole gospel is in that little word *your*. Your God means the God who shaped his whole life to be in relationship with you, not just in the good times but when you’ve completely messed up and when it’s all shocking and embarrassing and humiliating and sad. Think of the tiny child who screams out the words Daddy or Mummy at the top of their voice in a moment of pure joy or need, matched by complete confidence that the parent is entirely present and entirely devoted to him or her? We’re as close to God as that child to their parent. That’s the power of the word *your*. Jesus doesn’t talk about God, he talks about the *Lord your* God. God’s life is so shaped as to be yours. Love the Lord your God, reciprocate with the Lord who is *your* God, the One who is for *you*.

Then, in the light of loving that God, *our* God, we’re invited to love our neighbour as ourselves. Clearly there’s something foundational about the divine axis that then bears out along the human axis.

When it comes to neighbour, remember elsewhere Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbour?” I wonder if you feel a panic at such a moment: as if this command to love is an invitation to be overwhelmed, overwhelmed by anyone who’s in need. I can quickly jump from thinking about the people I know and encounter every week to the poor and vulnerable across the whole wide world. My prayer list can’t cope! On the personal level there’s a danger loving my neighbour becomes a recipe for either naïve sentimentalism or manic burnout. And on the political level, we have the Right talking about the responsibility for individual neighbours as if a shorthand for lowering taxes. While the Left suggests that loving your neighbour is something the government might do on our behalf.

Jesus tells us to love our neighbours as our selves. And what is there to say about our selves? Ever since Emmanuel Kant, the project of modernity has set about creating the kind of self that doesn’t need God or neighbour, a free-standing self. How’s this project going? I wonder. We’re inundated by self-help apps to make us pause and become more mindful, or to help us exercise to re-shape our bodies: yet we don’t *seem* to become any more peaceful or rejuvenated. Look at the progress of science and medicine to wipe out disease we used to say – until a pandemic struck that has flummoxed everyone. Meanwhile we have increasing affluence, yet fewer things to blame for the confused selves that we still are. As the poet Philip Larkin puts it, when there’s no one else left we blame our parents for the mess of our lives: “They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had And add some extra, just for you.” If it’s nature, it’s their genes that we blame; if it’s nurture, we simply blame their being too strict or too lenient, too distant or too smothering. But the problem of self-love isn’t sorted by having someone to blame. It seems the project of creating a self that doesn’t need God or neighbour isn’t going too well.

Where do we go with this, as Christians? I’d like to point to the one who is voicing these commandments: in whom God and neighbour come as a package deal. Jesus shows us what God looks like, the *Lord* God, whose life is shaped to be with us, the Lord *our* God, who’s as close to us as a mother to her baby. And Jesus shows us what our neighbour looks like. The Good Samaritan parable comes alive when we realise it is *Jesus* who was beaten and bruised and left to die. That’s what the cross did – it left Jesus dying by the side of the road, it made Jesus our neighbour. And it is *us* who walk past on the other side, then and now. When Jesus says, whatever you did for the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, you did for me, he’s showing us himself in our neighbour. So when Jesus says “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind… And you shall love your neighbour as yourself,” *he* is the Lord our God, and *he* is our neighbour.

So, then, what of our selves? I suggest we’re left with just one place to stand, and that’s face to face with Jesus. I am not my wallet, not my house, not my car, not my A level results, not my job title –not even my family. I’m what Jesus thinks of me, because Jesus is God, and Jesus is my neighbour. You can never fully know yourself, but you can be fully known: Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. Jesus is hurt by thoughtless things you never realised you’d done, and delighted by unconscious gestures you never realised you’d made. He understands the fear that makes you cruel and the joy that makes you generous. He rejoices in the very thrill of your existence, is tender and close to you when you are turned in on yourself, is overjoyed in the very moment of your repentance, is exultant as you spread your wings to fly in his Spirit. Jesus is the heart within your heart. And he loves you. And encourages *you* to love *you*.

I wonder if you’re any good at that? If you’re one of those whose been told you should live for others and always put others before yourself or risk being called selfish, I’d like to suggest you try swapping the words around. “Love yourself as your neighbour.” In other words, regard yourself as the first among all the neighbours God calls you to love. God’s got a lot to be doing with the whole of creation, but the wonderful thing is, God’s chosen to start with you. God loves every single one of us while still loving each of us as if we were the only one. We’re able to love others because of the way God loves us. And to accept that love, we have to learn to love ourselves.

I wonder if you’ve ever worked in a restaurant or a café. It’s hopeless starting a shift hungry because the very smell of food makes you crochety and bad tempered. If your tummy’s rumbling as your serve up the dinner you aren’t much help to your guests. Once upon a time I worked my holidays in a silver-service restaurant where they took the trouble to offer food first to all of us who waited on tables – because they found the team then did a much better job of serving their clients. You love others best by loving yourself first.

This is the work of self-love: to let yourself be loved by Jesus, and to be so energised and transformed by that love, that you love yourself as the first among all the countless neighbours God calls you to love. To learn to be their friend, you practice by being your own friend. That takes away the resentment of those neighbours, because they’re not taking away anything that belongs to you. You’ve already been looked after, because after being loved by Jesus, there’s nothing more to want.

If you find yourself looking elsewhere to bolster your self-regard I’ve got bad news for you: it’ll never be enough. It’ll be like pouring water into a jug with a leak at the bottom. Of course that’s exhausting. In that economy, looking after yourself is bound to take away from looking after others. But when the love of Jesus has made you something and someone you never dared imagine you could be, when it’s made you beautiful despite your blemishes, when it’s made you good despite your betrayals, when it’s made you true despite your lies, then self-love is simply a happy introduction to a story that isn’t finally about you.