Sermon preached by Revd John Proctor on 25th October 2026

Readings: Leviticus 19: 1-2 and 9-18; Matthew 22: 34-40

Trinity 21

Leviticus 19:18, 'love your neighbour as yourself'

Leviticus – a bit tricky to spell, perhaps difficult to locate in the Bible, rarely in the lectionary, and if you've ever dipped into it challenging to understand and apparently rather remote from most of our daily concerns. Apart from that, straightforward.

Then it surprises you. Amid rather perplexing chapters, a little oasis of clarity: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' The last line of today's reading. Possibly one of those lines in the Bible that you've known longer than you can remember. 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Easy to recite – a command we can grasp. Occasionally a bit harder to do – when we try to let the command grasp us. But surely part of a Christian approach and attitude to life.

In Leviticus? But didn't Jesus say it? He did. But he wasn't the first. He quoted this text, as the second-most important command among the hundreds to be found in Israel's ancient law. Number one being of course, 'Love God with all your heart and soul and strength.' Once we've managed to do that … neighbour comes next. Or maybe a better way of putting it is that a faithful life runs on two rails – relationship with God and attitude to neighbour.

If we ever ask who might count as our neighbour, we shall run into that parable Jesus gave about a wounded man from a different ethnic group on a lonely road – all about the cost and risk and openness involved in serious neighbour love. The path from Jerusalem to Jericho is not at all an hospitable place. But the Good Samaritan wasn't our reading today, and I'm not going to explore it at length.

Except to say that it does make a point about symmetry. Loving neighbour as yourself may sound symmetrical. I'll do for you what you do for me. We love those who love us; we gravitate to friends of our own background and income group. Yet the command, in Jesus' teaching and in Leviticus, seems to be slanted a bit differently. It's more like, I'll do for you what I'd want to be done for me if I were in your shoes. The neighbour may be differently positioned in life to me, without some of the circumstances, maybe without advantages, that I have. Neighbour love reckons with that.

So now we'll focus on the section in Leviticus that talks about neighbour love – the sorts of things it might mean in practice, in God's world – where it's leading, and what it might achieve. When this command was coined, what was it about?

A basic thing that runs through our reading: loving your neighbour is part of the fingerprint of God on the world, one way that we enter into and declare the goodness of God. 'You shall be holy because I am holy,' the chapter begins. Here is a kind of mimicking God, copying what God is like – living as if our days and duties are a God-zone. Maybe loving neighbour and loving God are not too far apart.

Then each short paragraph in our reading ended, 'I am the Lord.' Do these things because God is, God is good, God is great, God is involved in the world, and in your life.

Neighbour love doesn't start with you and me. It's not a parcel we put together out of our own creativity, then wrap up and deliver. It's more like a parcel we receive and share out. We love because God loves us, we give love because we have received it, we are a loving people because we are a loved people. We aim to reflect God's love because we have found that God is involved in human living. We

live with open hearts and hands because the heart and hands of God have been opened to us – not least on the cross of Jesus. Love people, and that's one way you make known that God is real.

So how to do it? Let's track the verses that lead up to this text, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' They show something about how it might work in practice. Three short snippets.

First, 'At harvest time, don't reap your fields to the very edge. Leave something for the poor and the refugee to come and pick up.' A waste? Or a lifeline? But perhaps you haven't got a field, nor even an allotment. So what is this about? It's about who eats and who doesn't – not always wanting the maximum amount of the world's resources for me, but getting into the habit of noticing other people's needs and situations.

It might be about buying something at the supermarket that we don't need this week, and leaving it in the box at the exit for the local foodbank. It might mean reviewing that Standing Order for Christian Aid, as part of what we in one of the world's richest countries can manage to share with some of the world's poorest. It might be about a local church finding helpful and respectful ways to contribute to the well-being of the local community, in tough and fearful times.

Not really about being careless with the vegetable bed. Not exactly leaving apples on the tree. Not a matter of pushing food off the corner of our dining table. But a reminder to those who do know where the next meal is coming from to be aware of the many in our world who don't. Part of loving our neighbour is sharing. If you do that, God rejoices. That's one way you print the truth of God onto the story of this world.

A second part of loving our neighbour is being straightforward and fair. 'Don't steal, or deal falsely, or lie, or speak ill of people, or show bias when you relate to others.'

> Who was the work colleague that everyone trusted: you never heard them speak ill of other people who were out of the room, and you knew they wouldn't gossip about you when your back was turned?
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> Who was the schoolteacher you respected, because you could learn with them for a whole year without ever feeling they had favourites in the class, or that they would criticise you without good reason?
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> Who was the sports captain who picked people on merit, not just because they were personal friends – or the sports coach who didn't always favour their own or their friends' sons and daughters?
>
> Or the employer who dealt equally with each person, whatever your background, gender, skin colour, or personal situation?

If that was you, if that is you, treating people honestly and evenly and earning their trust for doing so, God rejoices. That sort of attitude writes the wisdom of God into the story of this world.

Another part of loving our neighbour is about protection and support. 'Don't oppress your neighbour, or curse the deaf, or put a stumbling block in the way of the blind.' There are always people, in every group or community, who need a bit of extra consideration. Most of us find ourselves there at some seasons of in our life. Some people spend a lot of time there, and can't always stand up for themselves in the way that many others can. Not that such people are passengers. Often they have immense gifts and wisdom to contribute to the common good. But they make their contribution best, if others help to shape a world in which they can make it.

So part of loving our neighbour is making our community a secure and supportive place for people of all sorts of abilities and circumstances; setting the world up so that people can be confident, so that

people don't get pushed to the edges or elbowed aside or ignored. Who is there around you who can't do all the things you can do? And what can you do to take obstacles out of their path? What can you do to help that person feel safe, confident and included, to help them be an active, respected member of the community? If you're doing that, God rejoices. You're helping to cover the earth with signs of the presence of God.

Loving our neighbour? And some guidelines, some detail, about what it might mean in practice:

sharing the basics of life;

straightforward speech and attitudes, with everyone we deal with;
consideration and support in the way we manage our life together.

In a way this won't be news to you. I know that many people here do plenty of this. But in a way this is news, good news, gospel, printing the love of God onto the life of this world. It speaks of a generous, involved and understanding God. So keep doing it, show love for neighbour, grow in love for neighbour, and as you do, remember that you are passing on the love of God, given above all in the open heart and open hands of the crucified Jesus.

John Proctor