

Sunday 18th October, NEIGHBOUR SUNDAY – Mark 12:28-34: Loving God and neighbour

This morning I awoke to the sound of heavy machinery in the fields below us. The new estates are going up quickly, and after the hiatus of the spring lockdown, the houses are being built again with extra energy, it seems. The sound that usually travels furthest and loudest, as it did this morning, is the huge piledriver, thudding into the soil, making the holes for the foundations to go in.

Good housing needs good foundations – and the same is true of the spiritual life. And in today's passage we come across probably the deepest foundation of all, the biblical piledriver if you like, which establishes the basis of everything else we believe:

'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one – and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.'

These words are known in the Jewish faith as The Shema and they form the foundation, the heart, the baseline of our both our understanding of God and of our purpose in life. **There is only one God, who is the Lord, and we were made to love this God.**

Before we conclude that this seems like a one-sided relationship, let's remember that God himself is love. God loved, God *loves*, us first – so our response of love is reciprocating what God has already shown us. We love because God loves. And, like God, we are to love wholeheartedly – that is part of what it means for us humans to be made in God's image. We have an unusual capacity for love.

And so when the teacher of the law asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, Jesus goes back to the foundation of the faith he grew up in: the Lord God is one, and our goal in life is to love this God. For all that Jesus has the reputation for controversy, no-one can argue with this. As my teenage son would say: 'Facts.' (It's how middle-aged people like me would say 'agreed' or 'definitely'.)

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He quotes a second commandment from a different part of the Torah – the books of the law – because this first and greatest commandment has a practical outworking. To love God is a whole enterprise in itself, but much of the time, **the way we practise this is to love our neighbour.** As St John says later, no-one can say they love God, whom they haven't seen, if they don't love their sister or brother, whom they have seen.

And we are to love others *as ourselves*. Now this phrase is sometimes misunderstood. It is sometimes interpreted to mean 'as much as ourselves', and this isn't wrong, it's a useful way of looking at it – but it's not the literal meaning of the words. Literally, the force of the original law is to love your neighbour 'as a human being like yourself'. In other words, it's a command to recognise our common humanity. That your neighbour is a person like you, with the same basic needs and wants; and crucially, is also – like you – made in God's image. God thinks our neighbour is special, unique, deserving of love and care, and therefore so should we.

In many ways, this command is a counterpart to the golden rule that we should do to others as we would have them do to us – in other words that we treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated, not necessarily as we have been treated, or even as they have treated us. It is a high calling, but it remains the foundation of what we believe and practise today.

We live in difficult times, and one can sense a weariness at present at the ongoing restrictions and anxieties and we continue to face. The enthusiasm and togetherness of the spring has given way to anger and division in the autumn. But whatever we think about the quality of governance in our country at the moment, **our neighbour is still our neighbour**. They are still special to God, they are unique and precious and our high calling is to love them.

Today is Neighbour Sunday – it's not a Sunday I was familiar with until this year, but it feels very timely, and so I wanted to dedicate our worship to it today even though it's not well-known, because it feels more important than ever that we go back to basics, back to our foundations.

There is so much we can't control at present, and so little that is certain. So let's go back to what we *do* know, to simple, practical daily faith. **God loves us. We love God. And we love our neighbours.**

I chose that short video because it reminded me of two very helpful things. First that it's hard for people to see the beauty in the word at present. Our task as followers of Jesus is to help others find a bit of that beauty again. Love is beautiful – and our little acts of love spread beauty, perhaps especially to people who are finding it hard to see.

Secondly, a few simple words made the difference. Let us never underestimate the power of a quick phone call, or a safely distanced knock on the door. Let's not get tired of being good neighbours. As Jesus and the teacher agree, it's more important than all our religious rituals, and it draws us to the heart of the kingdom of God.

As I draw to a close, I'm going to play a lovely hymn, 'I heard the voice of Jesus say.' It's an invitation to rest in Jesus again, to find our life and hope in him. The point is that we can't manufacture this capacity to love unless we too are resting in God's love. We need to fill the tank, for the water of life to flow out of us. So let's sing or pray this as our desire to be filled with God's love again, that we might have renewed energy to love those around us as ourselves.

Amen.