

Sermon for Sunday 10th July 2016

Deuteronomy 30: 9-14 and Luke 10: 25-37

Who is my neighbour? –Why does the lawyer – the religious expert -want Jesus to define it for him? After all the lawyer knew the commandments, he had spent years studying the scriptures, arguing over the niceties. His first question to Jesus ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ is surely more of a challenge, a test, rather than a real desire to know. And he trots out the answer easily enough – based on the law in the book of Deuteronomy which was also referenced in our Old Testament reading today– “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

You’re right says Jesus – so do this and you’ll live.

But the lawyer hasn’t finished. He asks a follow up question and we’re told he does it to justify himself...justify his own behaviour – his own interpretation and application of the law....Which begs the question - who did he think was his neighbour – who did he think he was required to love?

Given Jesus’s story in reply, which throws the whole neighbour category wide open to include the despised Samaritans, you can only assume that, for the lawyer, neighbour meant Jew, possibly even ‘Jew like me’, possibly only those of my tribe or my religious persuasion – certainly not foreigners and certainly not Samaritans – who were quite literally the Jews neighbours – but hated and persecuted. And as we know from other encounters between Jesus and the religious experts – neighbour did not include for them the sick, the mentally ill, the poor and all those who were religiously unclean – hence the hurried departure of the religious passers-by in the parable.

So the lawyer has studied the religious law, and knows it well but has interpreted it to ensure that his application of it is comfortable and easy for him. Jesus however wants to shake him up – make him realise that his interpretation is too narrow – and get him to look at the law afresh.

It’s a well-known story for us and we are so used to hearing it that I suspect we are not shocked at all at the outcome – we are quite happy to say yes of course – we would stop to help someone in need... But is it the point

of this parable to tell us to be nice to people who have been mugged? Or even to help the disadvantaged? I don't think so actually.... This is a story to get the lawyer, and us, to think again about what the law really says and how we are going to apply it to our lives and if we tend to put too narrow boundaries around that law to suit ourselves.

It is not enough to know the law as the lawyer clearly does. He must also do what it says.

And that links us nicely to the reading from Deuteronomy we had this morning. It too sums up the law and then tells us:

'the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it.'

.....so you may obey it.

Moses here is speaking to the Israelites as they are about to enter the promised land and he reminds them that the law is not hard to know, indeed they already know it, and if they want to prosper they must keep it, they must actually do it.

Knowing the law is not enough, being able to recite it – it is in the interpretation of it and applying it to everyday life that is the crucial bit.

So for us we know the teaching in the bible, we hear it every week in church, we read it at home, the stories are so familiar.

But like the lawyer, do we keep it – do we live it out? – or do we apply it only in a way that suits us, that is not too demanding and not too inconvenient, that doesn't challenge our prejudices or our comfort?

Let's just pick up on that part that troubled the lawyer – 'love your neighbour' and bring it right up to date. Was that phrase foremost in your mind as you cast your vote in the recent referendum? Who is our neighbour? Does it include immigrants from other EU countries, or elsewhere in the world? Or would we rather love them at a convenient distance? Or looking at the migrant crisis – does our love include the many economic migrants who want a better life for themselves and their families – or does our love only extend to those we feel are deserving of it as they flee conflict? It's tricky isn't it? And it's rather uncomfortable....I wonder who Jesus would have put in

his parable if he was telling the story today here in Britain?

So Jesus, who is my neighbour? Can I say confidently everyone, even those who seek to harm me, or hold different religious or political views to me, or who have behaved so badly I cannot bear to think of them as neighbour. Terrorist, paedophile, criminal, where can I put the boundaries Lord? I don't have to love them do I?

Jesus shocked the lawyer so much by making the Samaritan the hero of the story that, have you noticed, the lawyer can't even bare to say the word, Samaritan, instead he talks about – 'the one who helped him'. Who are the people we can't even bare to name in the same breath as neighbour....?

In his parable and in his own life and actions and encounters..... remember the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers.... Jesus throws the boundaries of neighbour so wide that he is saying to the lawyer- there are no boundaries. It is as if he says - you shouldn't even be asking the question – you don't need to know 'who is your neighbour', because all people are..... Even those you fear or despise or distrust.... And even the Samaritan knew that.

So if thanks to Jesus I know who my neighbour is – what do I do with the second part of the sentence, that is to love?. Notice it is not to respect, or care about, to treat fairly, or even be kind to my neighbour– but to love. Altogether more demanding and difficult.

What love – really love everyone? What on earth does that look like? You have to ask well what does he mean by love – and I rather wish the lawyer had asked Jesus that question instead....What does it mean to love my neighbour?

(for 8 am: and if you want to hear more on that you'll have to listen to the rest of the sermon on line)

Thankfully there is help elsewhere in our Bibles. Jesus himself showed us what it means to love in the extreme, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..... – it means self-sacrifice – putting others needs before your own, loving so much you are prepared to die for another. I find that really challenging. Who would I be prepared to die for? My children perhaps – maybe... But others, people I don't know, nasty people, unkind unpleasant people.... I'm afraid my ability to love in that way is very limited.

So what other help is there in our bibles? Thankfully Paul comes to our rescue, because it was something the early church struggled with too. They knew they were called to love – Jesus had said it so many times, he said ‘love one another as I have loved you’ - – but what does it look like? What does loving other people really mean in terms of everyday relationships? It was the question the church in Corinth was struggling with when Paul wrote them that letter that is often read at weddings – it wasn’t written to a couple getting married, it isn’t really about being married – it’s about what it means to love as a Christian, living out Jesus teaching on loving your neighbour.

So from 1 Corinthians 13: ‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.’

That is what real love is like. It is a fantastic summary, an amazing list.

So dare I ask - how are we doing in our relationships with others – in this church; in our families; in our workplace; in our club; in our street? Are we always patient; kind;

protective; trusting; trustworthy; truthful; slow to anger; seeking the good of others not dishonouring them; do we keep no record of wrongs?

It is in the everyday encounters we have, in the words we say, the words we write, in the things we do or don’t do that we daily face the challenge of trying to obey this commandment or not. It is no good just knowing it if when we come up against each other we don’t apply it. But it is so hard!

When a fellow church member does or says something we disagree with, do we put this teaching into action – or do we snap at them with the same vigour and hostility that anyone else might – How do we speak to them with love? In our words, in our emails?

When someone in our family has offended us or upset us – do we hurt them back, do we stick up for our rights? How do we deal lovingly with them? Is there room for forgiveness? Can we ‘keep no record of wrongs’?

When we have to make a difficult decision do we seek the good of others first, do we in our words and actions seek to honour others not dishonour them?

I wonder are there emails and phone calls that like me, you need to press delete on with that in mind? Are there people you need to apologise to? Are there relationships that need mending or changing, putting on a new footing?

I for one am very glad that each week we start our worship with confession, when we repeat that law, love God and love neighbour, and we have a chance to admit our failings, so God can wipe the slate clean and we can start again. It is hard, but remember Moses tells them in Deuteronomy the law is not too difficult for us or beyond our reach – with God’s help it is possible. It is here perhaps, among our fellow Christians, that we get the chance to learn how to put that teaching into action – in the way we deal with each other, in the way we work with our differences, in the way we truly care for one another... if we can’t do it here what help is there outside in the world. At least here we all know the basic law and are trying to apply it. Being a Christian, trying to obey this teaching, is hard– it can be very demanding and personally very costly.

(for 8am: But to sum up for now, I return to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy...

We know the law written in the word for God, ‘“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” We have read it and heard it, but can we, as Moses said, try to keep it in our mouth and on our hearts, and do we, can we, put it into action in our everyday dealings with other people?

That was the challenge for the lawyer who questioned Jesus and that is the challenge for each one of us too.