

## **Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 25 October 2020 11.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

**'Loving your neighbour - a hard task'.**

**Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

**Loving your neighbour might sound like the easy part of Christianity - we all want to help people. But Leviticus invites us to consider that this isn't as easy as it sounds. What if our neighbour doesn't want the kind of love we are offering? What if we are offering the kind of love our neighbour doesn't need? Jesus reminds the Pharisees of the call to love the neighbour. Perhaps he does so, because he knows it will challenge their faith.**

At a Black Lives Matter protest, a white man who was attempting to protect statues from damage, got into trouble with some protesters and was injured. A black protester lifted him up on his shoulder, and carried him to the emergency services. The image of this black man, rescuing the white man, went viral.

Leviticus calls on people to act with justice – not singling out anyone – poor or rich – it might have said, black or white – not hating anyone or bearing a grudge – but ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Treat others as you would like to be treated.

During the first lockdown, people loved their neighbours through shopping for those who were self- isolating or elderly. A sense of community was created. Even in our street, with few permanent residents, Thursday nights became an opportunity to smile at neighbours – at their windows clapping. It seems a long time ago now!

Leviticus is not just trying to encourage us to love our neighbour and do good deeds occasionally. The priestly writers of Leviticus are seeking a certain behaviour. Holiness defined by God, is treating your neighbour, not as some unfortunate who requires help, but as an equal – one who might offer you something as much as the other way round. Love which builds a community.

There has been an interesting development in the WLM Services over the last year. The language has changed. We now talk about people with 'strengths' and 'assets'. Rather than define someone as 'poor', or 'homeless' which puts them in a box, the idea is to see the whole person – who might have a variety of assets; carpenter; cook and so on. Changing the language changes the nature of the relationship. Changes who thinks they have the power. Changes how one loves one's neighbour.

Leviticus warns against judging unfairly.

So to love one's neighbour – to offer help in a time of need, whilst respecting the integrity of that person, is something we are called to as people of faith dating back to this Levitical law of the early Jewish people – to love your neighbour as you love yourself.

But it can be a hard task.

Looking back, I'm not sure whether I was a neighbour to the 'homeless' person – no, a person who had a family, a career, aspirations – who happened to turn up at a previous church of mine having been made homeless. To love my neighbour was a hard task. I did try to treat this person as having 'strengths' – 'assets'. To treat them as a whole being – not to place them in a box named 'poor' – to me feel better about myself for helping. For over a year, I offered the person hospitality in the church during the day, free coffee and some basic provision. Mostly, I – and others – offered a listening ear. Hours of listening. Two of my staff accompanied the person on a journey to visit an ill relative – something the church could offer that Social Services would not do. In fact, once Social Services decided that working with the church might be a way to resolve the situation the person with strengths and assets had found themselves in, the role the church could provide became respected and a partnership began.

To love my neighbour – who worked in Social Services – without slandering them in staff meetings or bearing a grudge, was, I admit, perhaps the hardest part of loving one's neighbour in this story. Did I love my neighbour as I love myself? Would I have wanted someone to do all this for me if I was a well-educated person with 'assets' who happened to have experienced mental health problems? Did I seek justice for my neighbour – and seek not to judge?

Eventually, after a year, I had worked out how to obtain the benefits which were due to this person and persuaded them that to get them would offer opportunities. A meeting was arranged with the benefits officer. I offered to go on Monday morning ...

But sometimes, one's neighbour doesn't want the kind of love one is offering.

Had I decided what I would want in that situation rather than listening to the person concerned? Had I created a 'problem' to be solved – a 'box' to be ticked? Had loving my neighbour as myself, turned into 'getting what I thought my neighbour needed?'

Perhaps it was not the kind of love my neighbour needed?

I saw the person about a year later – living somewhere – looking healthier. I pray that is still so.

Or perhaps it was the kind of love my neighbour needed. Which brings us to another question – when does the state or society intervene to protect a neighbour? I have sat for many long hours, discussing with psychiatrists, whether to admit someone to hospital because they pose a danger to themselves or others. I experienced in the 80s the very real issue many clinical managers face today for other reasons – what are the needs of the neighbour and their neighbours, versus how many beds are available.

Loving your neighbour – hard choices for social worker; clinician; minister.

The passage from Leviticus, is a version of the ten commandments; a little less well known than Exodus. Leviticus arises from a Priestly writing. Behind the various commands and laws of Leviticus are a question: what does one have to do, to be close to the centre of the cultic worship. What sort of behaviour should a worshipper exhibit? And the example offered – of behaviour needed to be closer to God, is the example of the courtroom. In previous verses, Leviticus deals with the consequences of stealing from a neighbour and paying a fair wage. These circumstances might land one in a courtroom.

When giving a judgement – perhaps in a court or tribunal, make sure it is based on justice; don't show favouritism to the poor or deference to the rich – treat everyone equally; don't go about speaking untruths about others.

You shall 'reprove' your neighbour – or correct them, or bring a charge against your neighbour – in other words, if there is something wrong, or troubling, bring it out in the open. The consequence of not doing so might be to bear a grudge or speak untruths – or gossip. The sentiment here is to name the problem. We need to do this more in churches.

In doing this, you will love your neighbour. But love them as you love yourself. Love them as you would like to be treated. With such love, you will not only restore community – you will be close to the centre of worship – the heart of God.

I took a decision to love my neighbour that involved intervention for wider protection. Last winter, just before lockdown, as the Prime Minister was announcing the pre-lockdown restrictions, I with others, took the decision to close the Winter Night Shelter. This was as the meal was being cooked and the guests were about to arrive. I then spent the evening telling guests of our decision to close – which as you will imagine, didn't go down too well. It was for their safety. Maybe we saved a life? Who knows?

To love your neighbour, it would seem logical to welcome the guests in from the street. Conversely, at that time, being on the street was safer. Did our neighbours like the kind of love we were offering? If we had let them in, might we have been offering the kind of love our neighbour might have wanted, but didn't need?

Looking back, I think we did love our neighbours – even if it seemed totally counter intuitive. With hindsight, we might have found hotels for the night? We did find hotels for the guests at King's Cross a few days later. But having booked the hotels where isolating was easy, frustratingly, another local institution stepped in and invited all the guests into one hall.

Our neighbours were offered the kind of love they might have wanted, but didn't need.

Sometimes, well meaning love of neighbour, needs to be challenged. You shall reprove your neighbour. Is what is being provided actually for the best? That is a question we should be constantly asking whether it be in the WLM Services, or what we offer to people at Hinde Street or King's Cross.

'Loving your neighbour - a hard task'.

It is interesting to reflect, that during lockdown, the government housed virtually everybody – although not long term.

The 'Everyone in' programme, saw the street homeless count in Westminster, fall from 340 a night, to 30 in lockdown, as people were offered hotels and flats. WLM staff were part of the support mechanism. The street homeless count has risen back to 260 now. The financial cost, of course, was huge. But it can be done with the correct investment. As can supporting jobs in Manchester or elsewhere. The question is, how much tax do you want to pay? Most post war elections have returned governments which promote less state aid.

Loving your neighbour; hard choices for politicians and the electorate.

What I wanted to suggest today, is that loving your neighbour, as yourself, trips off the tongue – is a core part of Christianity – perhaps we do it in a certain way and haven't thought about why. I have suggested, it is a hard task. For Social worker, politician, minister, church member.

Leviticus invites us to love our neighbour in the context of drawing closer to God, and creating community. To do so with justice and without judgement. Can we see the strengths and assets of the person without judging, or without trying to solve a problem we want to solve?

When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees, which is the greatest commandment, he replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Which is what the Pharisees expected. But then he adds this addition from Leviticus. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

And perhaps Jesus adds this, because to love your neighbour as yourself, is the hard task.