

**Hinde Street Methodist Church
 Sunday 31 October 2021
 11.00am Richard Shepley**

“Who is my Neighbour?”

Text: **Mark 12: 28-34**

Here's a not very interesting fact – nor seemingly one particularly relevant to this sermon.

Did you know that only four out of the 27 chapters of Leviticus are NOT completely about the laws of the people of Israel? And it isn't a page-turner by any means.

It may be a cure to read Leviticus if you suffer from insomnia.

And did you know that according to most Jewish authorities, there are in total 613 laws in the first five books of the bible?

The first commandment which Jesus says is the greatest is given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus?

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

But the second greatest, “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself*” has no direct connection with Moses, and only occurs in Leviticus where it is buried deep in Chapter 19 and it's not even the beginning of the particular commandment!

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus took this obscure commandment - locked away in the depths of Leviticus - and dragged it into the limelight to add it to the “Great Commandment” as the second greatest commandment. Hard to believe as it is so famous now.

Looking at these two commandments, begs a question:

“You shall love”. Can you order somebody to love? Can it be a command?

You can - if it's an action rather than emotion.

And actions are what seem to be important here.

In Luke's version of the same story, the lawyer asks,
 “*Who is my neighbour?*”

And Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. At the end, he doesn't ask the lawyer, "So, then, who *is* your neighbour?",

Instead, he asks, "*Who was neighbour to the man who was beaten up?*"

No theory here – practical action Who DID something?

Then, the follow-up point, "Go and **do** likewise."

The Love of God is definitely about action, "God so loved the world, that he gave . . ."
The Greek word here is "agape" – selfless, unconditional love.

God gave us his son so that we would not die. It's a doing kind of love.

"Go and **do** likewise."

But it **definitely** is an “emotional” love as well?

Of course. Jesus was an emotional man. He wept over Jerusalem. He wept when he got to the tomb of the dead Lazarus.

We have no record of him laughing and the Victorians painted him as “*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” and nothing more. But Jesus said “*I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*”

God cradles us in his “everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27)

So, yes, we can be commanded by God to love God and our neighbour. To “*go and do likewise.*” But we can also be held by God, hidden in God, filled with holy joy.

A few weeks ago, I was somewhere – I think it was here in church but I can’t actually remember. Anyway, someone was reading a passage from the Last Supper discourses of Jesus in John’s Gospel. Familiar words.

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

Now you know you can hear words that you have heard hundreds of time before, but this particular time . . .

Well, suddenly, I sat up and thought, “WHAT? run that by me again, the bit in the middle!” (metaphorically of course – I didn’t interrupt the service. I’m a Methodist after all). ***As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.***

Now just think about that for a second. *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.*

In other words, the love of Jesus for us is no different from the love with which the Father has loved Jesus since before the beginning of time.

And all I could think was **WOW!**

This is not a cold “dutiful” love, but a warm embracing one. Compassionate, Steadfast, Eternal, Unchanging – and Infinite.

So, as the lawyer said to Jesus,
“Who IS my neighbour . . .”

My brother, Steve, has lived in Texas for most of his life. The last time I was there we went with Sandra his wife who is a Buddhist to the Zen Centre in Houston. Steve calls in sometimes and has got to know the Abbot Gaelyn very well. We went to find her in the kitchen where she was preparing the evening meal – a chicken stew. As we got there she was wrestling with the carcass of the bird. “Ah,” said Steve, “I see you are about to roast Brother Chicken.”

Gaelyn, who is used to Steve, smiled and replied, “Yes. And next I’m going to boil Brother Carrot and Sister Celery.”

“Who is my neighbour?”

Today is the first day of the COP26 summit in Glasgow. Over the past few weeks, we have been fed terrifying stories by the media about what is happening in our world. Extreme weather events. Melting ice caps. But also hundreds and hundreds of small stories that don’t always get full media attention.

A couple of weeks ago Alethea, Emerson and I went to Methodist Central Hall to an evening event on climate change. It was excellent in many ways. And challenging.

One of the ways it was challenging was when a delegate talked about our relationship as human beings to the natural world.

Should, she asked, we regard the natural realm – animals, plants, even rocks – as our neighbours – and as Jesus instructed us “Go and be neighbour to them”?

Radical? Well, this isn’t exactly a new an idea.

Firstly, St Francis of Assisi preached to the birds and animals and – in his Cantic of the Sun – sang about my Lord Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Mother Earth – even Sister Bodily Death.

And secondly, Roger Cotterrill emailed me this, *“You may know that in very recent years in some countries non-human entities have been given their own legal rights as persons. This is not news as regards some animals, but in a few countries – New Zealand, India, Columbia, Ecuador, for example – certain rivers have been given rights as legal persons. So, your ‘Brother River’ has rights that can be asserted at law (through its official appointed guardians, a bit like a power of attorney).*

We all know the hymn “All things bright and beautiful”, written in 1846, and crediting the creation of everything to the Lord God.

But how many of us have sung verse 3? Not many, I guess. It was first omitted from a hymn book in 1906. This is it . . .

*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

Why? Because . . .

Over time, our *understanding* of truth changes.

The idea that God makes some rich and others poor is no longer seen as Christian truth.

Today is the last day of Black History Month. Take a last look at our exhibition around the church of Black men and women who must no longer be forgotten or side-lined.

Over time, our *understanding* of truth changes.

The idea that God made some people white (and superior) and others black (and inferior) we now know is offensive to God and is a travesty of the Gospel of Jesus.

Over time, our *understanding* of truth changes.

Not for the survival of a particular species, or plant type, but possibly for the survival of our entire planet; perhaps at this critical time, our understanding of who is our neighbour must change to embrace **all** that God created, and we must go out of our ways to be neighbours to the whole of creation.

And we have to remember that it can't just be an emotional love (like hugging a tree – not that I have anything against hugging trees), but a practical love that fires us to **action** – to fight for Animals, Plants and Rocks; Brother Wind and Sister Water. And even for Brother Carrot and Sister Celery.

Jesus said this is the second greatest commandment:

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”

And it's an order:

“Go and do likewise.”