

**Love God, Love neighbour**

*Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-40*

The Old Testament book of Leviticus is not, I confess, one that I dabble in often to find sermon material. There are a lot of laws and rules and regulations, one scholar describes it as a, "rising tide...placed mostly in the negative."<sup>i</sup> But at the heart of this tricky book, we find a number of things.

It is a book about holiness. *"You shall be holy; I the Lord your God am holy"*<sup>ii</sup>. The holiness of God demands to be reflected in human beings and how they live. It is, in these verses at least, a book about love. *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*<sup>iii</sup> Even more startling, later on in the chapter, *"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."*<sup>iv</sup> Paul quotes these ideas in the Letter to the Galatians; and Jesus, in His teaching in the Temple in the week leading up to His death quotes from His Holy Book, what we call the Old Testament. When He was asked which was the greatest commandment in Jewish law, He replied, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind....And...you shall love your neighbour as yourself."* Taken from the Book of Deuteronomy, and the Book of Leviticus. On these two commandments, He said, everything depends.

The foundation, the bedrock, the basics, the 'what it all boils down to...' Love God, love neighbour. To learn to love our neighbour as ourselves requires that we learn to be befriended and loved by God so that we will have selves sufficient to love.

"God is love. The heart of the life of the Church and of every Christian is love."v This central shining principle, the 'Golden Rule', is borrowed by Christianity from Judaism, and is borrowed from Christianity by Islam. The three great Abrahamic faiths share this notion. Love God, love neighbour; and love self, because we too are made in the image of God.

Jerusalem: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Hostages from Israel: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Gaza: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Palestinian hospitals and tented cities: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Kyiv and Moscow: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Kabul: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Lewiston, Maine: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

Yemen; Beirut; Sudan and South Sudan; Niger; China; Taiwan; North Korea: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

The heart of the life of the church and of every Christian, and every person from any faith family is love. Love, however, is not easy, but difficult and hard. The emphasis on love as *the* defining characteristic of the Christian life...makes it difficult for Christians to understand what it might mean to face the hard demands of love which but must sometimes be tough.

Love God, love neighbour; love self is about tough love. We know what our neighbours can be like, and we know what we can be like.

For Jews in Israel, for Muslims and Christians in Palestine, and for those of us who live in and around Morningside, God has placed us in communities of support, challenge, opportunity, difference, sinfulness, and love. In the world of God and the world of humanity, we come up

against what is wholesome and healthy and wonderful, and what is broken and diseased and despicable.

But still: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

You don't have to live on a fearful Kibbutz where hundreds were killed and hundreds kidnapped; you don't have to live in the rubble-mounded, equally blood-stained streets of Gaza city and the surrounding townships, to know how hard it is to live up to: Love God, love neighbour; love self.

'I simply can't stand her. I have cut him out of my life. She only thinks about herself. I wish he would simply go away. Hell will freeze over before I ever cross that doorstep. Who do they think they are? They're just not like us. I can never forgive.'

Do any of these resonate with you? In your home. In your workplace. In your school, college or university. In an organisation you attend. In the church. Amongst your family. Amongst your colleagues. Amongst your friends.

I don't intend these words to be a massive guilt trip. The tough love of our Christian faith is always going to be a challenge. We will, and do at times, get it right. I know that; I see that. But we also know that we get it wrong, fall short, don't live up to the aspiration.

The words from Leviticus quoted by Jesus are a constant reminder that we are called to act ethically with those around us.

The words of Leviticus, quoted by Jesus, challenge us to show a love that demonstrates itself in the way others are treated, not just in the intention of the heart. Love must be seen, not just felt.

Love is forgiveness and welcome personified.

The words of Leviticus, quoted by Jesus, challenge us to practice a definition of neighbour that removes barriers between people. The people who live near us and are like us; the people who

are far from us and unlike us; the people who are often neglected or marginalised or misunderstood or feared.

The words of Leviticus, quoted by Jesus, challenge us to put human feet on the relationship between love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self. In a world of terrorism, brutal immigration policies, soul-crushing poverty, economic systems more fragile than we often realise; justice for self must also mean justice for neighbour. We may not love ourselves perfectly, but since we know our intentions, we often give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. When we love our neighbours in the same way, our world might just begin to look a whole lot more like the one God created for us, and for our neighbour.

We cannot say we have a love for God if we do not love our neighbour. We cannot say we have a love for God if we do not love ourselves. Not more than, not less than, but *as* ourselves. This is what Leviticus means when we are called to be holy, like God. This is what Jesus means when He says these two commandments about loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves is how we are to love our way into the community that includes all God's children. In our neighbourliness we love others with the same kind of slack we cut ourselves. It is not only individuals who are found to be holy; the whole community, the whole world, is found to be holy too.<sup>vi</sup>

Oh, how I hate this passage, with its goody-two-shoes implications, and worse, it's unrealistic aspirations. How can you and I ever achieve this counsel of perfection? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And...you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

And yet, oh how I love this passage, with its goal to aim at, and it's recognition that we might not get the whole thing all at once, but bits of it we can put into practise and realise that our being Christian is always going to be a work in progress; a process that involves work, and consideration

and effort; and calls for help. In the small things in life, which is where tough love finds a home. And also in the bigger things in life where we, and others, may be called to do something heroic. "At the precise moment of her deliverance from a hellish ordeal Yocheved Lifshitz paused and turned to grip the hand of one of the masked Hamas militants who had kept her captive. 'Shalom', she said. The handshake and the Hebrew word for peace were a remarkable gesture by the 85-year-old Israeli who later spoke of brutality and mercy during her 16 days as a hostage in Gaza. At a press conference last Tuesday Lifshitz said that after the initial violence her Hamas captors had shown 'care' and 'gentleness' – a rare description of humanity in a savage conflict that may turn even bloodier...As (she was) handed to aid workers, Lifshitz turned to a Hamas militant who held an assault rifle, offered her hand and bid him farewell with the Hebrew version of the Arabic word for peace, salaam."<sup>vii</sup>

It can be done.

Love God, love neighbour; love self.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Tom Tate, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4*, p194

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19:2

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>iv</sup> Leviticus 19:34

<sup>v</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p193

<sup>vi</sup> Tate, *ibid*, pps196-198

<sup>vii</sup> Rory Carrol and Jason Burke, *Guardian*, 24/10/23