

## **Love your neighbour as yourself:**

This text from Leviticus is yet another example of how we can extract a truth from Scripture that is entirely at odds with that that very Scripture itself was saying. “Love your neighbour as you love yourself – ah – that means that you can’t love your neighbour until you have learned how to love yourself! And blow me, the scripture is turned into its exact opposite! Because at what point in your life, will you get beyond loving yourself and as far as loving your neighbour?”

Of course, there are no end of people suffering from what we, today, might call a low sense of self-esteem! You see this in the television programmes that trace children born in the year 2000 – to see how children of that generation are learning and growing. And professor Robert Winston conducts little tests to establish the level of self-esteem held by these children - even when they were as young as three or four years old. And I remember watching this stuff years ago – when one of my sons was that age.

And the test itself ran along these lines: a child is given a simple task, I think it was a picture of something. And then they are sat down, and five stars are placed at the other side of the table. And the examiner says – simply, ok – how many of these stars do you think you deserve for doing that picture. In other words, rate your efforts, your accomplishments, on a rating of 1-5. And it was utterly astonishing, even with super-confident, articulate toddlers – just how many of them took only one or two stars. In fact, I found it so shocking that these kids were concluded to have such little self esteem, that I conducted the experiment upon my oldest boy.

Some of you may remember the outcome, because I have spoken of it before. I put the stars out. Got him to do his drawing. And when his picture was complete – I asked him – how many stars does your picture deserve? And he looked at me with an expression of sheer disappointment: and he said “I don’t want any stars.” What not even one! “I want sweetsies!”

I’m not sure what that says about his level of self esteem! More than I would like to admit, I suspect. But if nothing else, it shows that self-esteem is a difficult thing to measure. Largely, I suspect, because the way we have to try to counter low self-esteem nowadays, is to do lots of self-affirmation – and self-respect! So when Jesus comes along and summarises the law by saying that we must love God with all our heart soul mind and strength, and love our neighbours as ourselves, he is perceived to be encouraging people to boost their self-esteem by whatever means possible.

If you have low self esteem because you are overweight – then there are Christian dieticians who will quote Jesus’ summary of the law and the prophets as a means of selling their latest diet. But I’m not sure if this is really what Jesus was getting at, or what Leviticus is getting at.

In the book of the Leviticus, the call to love neighbour as yourself is not a basis for the law – it is a summary of it! And there is a difference. If you want to understand what it means to love your neighbour, the reading from Leviticus puts some flesh on the bones of it. This is a set of instructions about how a community functions, and about how individuals within a community are called to live with one another. And expounded this way, there are even strong secular forms of ethics that are rooted in this bible passage.

Interesting then, to compare the ethics of Leviticus 19 with some of the welfare concerns as expressed in proposed cuts to current practices! You can understand, for instance, why Ian Duncan Smith is proposing to encourage those claiming job seekers allowance into works for public service. Of course, the kind of people targeted here, are those who are claiming money they shouldn't be claiming, whilst working other jobs! Equally, there are those many people who do not work at all, and who think society owes them a living. These are the people being targeted!

But, in reality, who is going to be on the receiving end of this? Is it going to be wasters and loafers and benefit cheats. Or are the vast majority going to be people who have lost their jobs because we are in the middle of a recession? People who have already been kicked in the teeth and struggling now to support families. People already feeling bad enough about themselves – without, what at this stage, looks like the public humiliation doing what many have described as “menial work!” And regardless of how this ends up working its way out in the end, even the threat of being put in this position is, for many people, horrific. Having lost your job, you are now forced into doing community service that previously had been done only by those who have committed petty crime!

It will feel to many as though losing your job is a crime! But maybe, that's the price we pay when an unjust banking system is protected from the recession it has caused. Maybe, this is what happens when a government is, as Leviticus says, “Partial to the poor and deferential to the powerful!”

There is a human cost here, which is genuinely damaging to a person's self esteem. Of course, with all of this stuff, we are only scratching the surface. Of course we want to see an end to benefit fraud. And of course, if we criticise a government for taking a particular course of action, we have to be prepared to offer an alternative.

Apart from the very obvious call for a Robin Hood tax, spearheaded by a gathering of movements to try to force governments to target the finance industry itself, what does it mean for Christians to be living in a time like this.

I try to imagine what Jesus himself would say if he were here. And whilst part of me thinks he'd be in the mix, shaking up the policy makers and confronting the powerful – during his own ministry, he didn't always do that. Jesus lived in a day where the poorest people were taxed the most – temple taxes and Roman taxes. Laws and rules and expectations that were utterly unjust. And instead of simply accepting those laws, or simply challenging them – he tried instead to subvert them:

Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, giving your tunic as well as your cloak. So just imagine – this community work going on in your area. Might the genuinely churchly thing to do, be to actually go and spend time doing this supposedly demeaning community work alongside them? Doing voluntarily what is being imposed on other people! Would that be a way of loving our neighbours as ourselves? That would certainly be a powerful statement about the true identity of the church!

It is the kind of action I have seen on several occasions with members of our congregation this week – and the biggest frustration is that I want to celebrate it, and ring bells and say – this is love in action. I've seen our deacons engaging in precisely this ministry, this week –

loving their neighbours in ways that make them oblivious to the reality that the love of God is shining through these people.

It's frustrating because, out of sensitivity for all concerned – it feels wrong to make a big thing of it. But how often I want to thank God for the people in this place who seem to have little idea that they are fulfilling the call to love neighbour – week after week after year after year.

You see it in the attempts to help people struggling with governmental powers, legal authorities, immigration authorities, financial authorities. The practical help, the long term, slow, inglorious, painstaking, work that goes on in this church by some people for the sake of others – is a constant source of amazement to me, and sometimes I wish I could get labels on this stuff.

And regardless of whether we see success when we're trying to find a bed for a homeless person, or a job for a refugee, or legal advice for those in trouble – regardless of the failure or success of those concerned – what does happen in all of these cases, is that people are heard. People are loved as we would like to be loved when we find ourselves in difficulty. And it happens here, and it happens a lot – and that, I think, is one of the reasons that people have found this church so attractive.

Sure – there is plenty we get wrong. Sure we have mixed motives, and mistakes and gripes and groans – like any other fellowship. But God is at work here. Not simply boosting the self esteem of those with low self esteem. But embodying the presence of God by solidarity with others.

That is what it means to love your neighbour as yourself. The love that we offer to others and to God, is not the overflow of our own self-love and self gratification. That stinks, and will never be attractive. The genuine love that flows from God, through people, and into our neighbours is always a surprise, always to be celebrated – but never something we choose to turn on and off like a tap.

The “application” section of this kind of sermon, if we must have one of those, is not “right – who can I go and show some good, neighbourly love to?” The question is rather, how can I worship God in Spirit and in truth, because if we do that – the love of God cannot help but spill out into a genuine, accidental, unpredictable, messy, quiet, radical, conventional love of our neighbour.