Sermon 25 October 2026 'Love your neighbour'

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

Our Gospel reading contains one of the most important and crucial passages of the Bible: *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* Matthew 22:39. You might possibly remember that I alluded to this passage last Sunday. This passage underpins everything Jesus stood for, everything he taught, everything he did. These two commandments have their origins in the Old Testament, and I don't mean as part of the Ten Commandments, though in a sense they are. Confused? I will come back to that in a moment. It is a common misconception that 'to love your neighbour' is one of the Ten Commandments.

So let's go back to the Old Testament in order to understand where these two commandments come from. Firstly, *'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* This is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6:5. This verse was part of the Shema, the basic and essential creed of Judaism, the sentence which every Jewish service opens with, and the first text which every Jewish child commits to memory. It means that we are called to love God unreservedly; that it must be our first priority.

Secondly, *'You must love your neighbour as yourself.'* Interestingly, this commandment is often ascribed to Jesus himself, but it is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, which we heard in our first reading. However, Jesus did one thing with this verse. In its original context, it has only to do with fellow Jews. It would not have included Gentiles (non-Jews), whom it was quite permissible to dislike, or even hate. So Jesus took an old law and gave it a whole new meaning.

There is another thing Jesus did which was new, and that was to put these two commandments together. No Rabbi had ever done this before. Look where they come from – one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus. It is really interesting that Jesus associates the caring of others with the loving of God. We have talked about this before in the context of Francis of Assisi who held the view that the caring of others was in fact an act of worship of God.

I said before that these two commandments are not strictly part of the Ten Commandments, but in a sense they are. They are in that Jesus, when he says, and I quote from our Gospel reading, *'All the other commandments are based on these two commandments.'* Matthew 22:40, is saying that these two commandments sum up the Ten Commandments. If you look at the Ten Commandments, generally speaking the first four are about loving God, and the remaining six are about loving others....generally speaking. But neither in itself is one of the ten.

I want to focus on the fact that Jesus associated the loving of others with the loving of God; the fact that he presents these two commandments not separately but together, that they go hand in hand. As we said last week, it is important that the ritual of worship does not become something of a barrier to our heartfelt expression of love for God. Similarly, we have made the point before that it is of little value if we come to church every Sunday and worship God enthusiastically if that worship is not reflected in how we live our lives Monday to Saturday.

I am sure you are familiar with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Two points I want to refer to in the context of our theme today. Firstly, the parable is in answer to a question posed by an expert in religious law, 'What must I do to receive eternal life?' Jesus answers him with a question of his own (what's known as the Socratic method), 'What does the law of Moses say?' The scribe answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, *'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* And Leviticus 19:18, *'You must love your neighbour as yourself.'* Jesus responds by saying, 'You are correct.'

But the scribe then asked a further question, 'Who is my neighbour?' And that is when Jesus, without further ado, related the story of the Good Samaritan.

I am not going to go into any detail on that parable right now, but I just want to highlight one interesting aspect in relation to the point Jesus makes that the worship of God and the love of others should go hand in hand. As we know, a man lies wounded on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, having been beaten and robbed. The first two men who come across him and pass him by are a Jewish

priest and a temple assistant. Why did they pass him by? Because their focus was on getting to the Temple and conducting worship. They didn't want any distractions, they didn't want any delays. Let someone else take care of the man – their priority was to worship God!

I remind you of the story of the devout lady who every day walked to her church in order to worship God. Every day she passed by beggars and hungry children in the streets, but she never gave them any attention such was her focus on getting to church. Then one day, she arrived to find the doors locked and a notice pinned to the door, which said, 'I am not here. I am out there.' That story could well have been inspired by the story of the Good Samaritan. It actually sums up the message of the Good Samaritan quite beautifully. It is also a succinct reminder to us all that worship of God is pointless if we are not inclined to practise our faith through carrying out that very important commandment, 'to love our neighbour.'

The worship of God and the caring of others is inextricably entwined. You simply cannot have one without the other. That's the point Jesus is making when he combines these two commandments together. I also quote from Matthew 5:16 where Jesus says*, 'Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.'*

Worship is good, wordship is great, but what we do tomorrow, wherever you might be and whatever you might be doing, at the shopping centre, at your local school interacting with teachers and parents, on the phone to someone who is struggling, that is what gives worship validity, meaning and purpose.

Missionary Bob Hodskins said, *'Every time I reach out to others, I feel blessed that my actions are bringing glory to God.'* And a perspective from another religion, Hindu philosopher and advocate for religious tolerance, Swami Vivekananda wrote, *'It is a privilege to serve mankind, for this is the worship of God. God is here, in all these human souls.'* I think that sums it up quite nicely.

I finish with a reflection. A woman went to see her vicar. Things hadn't been going her way and she was struggling emotionally and mentally. Her vicar suggested she write to Mother Teresa in Calcutta and offer to come and work with her and the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity for a few months. He was quite certain that in involving herself in attending to the poor and needy, would bring meaning and a sense of well-being back into her life. So the woman wrote to Mother Teresa. Weeks passed and she heard nothing. She was about to give up hope when a letter arrived from Calcutta. It was from Mother Teresa and it simply said, 'Find your own Calcutta. Love, Mother Teresa.

The message was clear to this troubled woman. You don't need to travel halfway around the world to find people in need. Each of us can find a Calcutta close at hand where there are people in need, whatever that need might be. The message is that our souls are made whole when we forget ourselves and reach out to meet the needs of those around us who need our love and our care.