



Talk by Revd Alex Clare-Young on 29th October 2023

Readings: *Matthew 22: 34-46; Leviticus 19: 1-2 and 15-18*

Justice at its Best

When I told one member of Solidarity Hub this week that the reading was ‘love God and love your neighbour as you love yourself’, they rolled their eyes. I raised an eyebrow in response and they pointed out – rightly in my experience – that this reading is so well known as to often be undermined, used to suggest a wispy washy kind of love that is about being nice, rather than about changing the world.

And so we had a conversation about where I might go with this that might avoid that eye-roll-worthy simplification, and about the other readings that the lectionary offers. It is striking that the command to love God and love your neighbour as yourself isn’t new. It is rooted in another reading that Jesus would have known well, the reading we have just heard from Leviticus. That reading tells us how to love ourselves and our neighbours – by doing justice, by avoiding gossip and slander, by not acting out of oppressive stereotypes and binary divisions and by not judging or moralising.

So this morning I would like to talk a bit about how we might love ourselves:

Because often we forget that the commandment to love our neighbour **AS WE LOVE OURSELVES** requires us to love ourself – So about how we might love ourselves,

And how we might love the other – our neighbour who isn’t just the person next-door but also the person in a different part of the city, county, country or even world, the person we aren’t supposed - in society’s normative view – to love never mind like – how might we love that person,

By – as Leviticus suggests – focussing on justice.

Dr. Martin Luther King Junior said that:

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

This quote directly parallels today’s reading from Leviticus, which tells us that we must love other people as we love ourselves by acting justly, by being honest about power, and by focussing not only on not discriminating but acting in intentionally anti-discriminatory ways. It’s funny that when I put it like that it sounds very modern and new. It’s not. It’s there almost like for like in Leviticus.

We often talk about boundaries in church settings, and good boundary setting can be helpfully described as loving ourselves in order to love other people in the same way. The Levitical law’s call to justice, and Jesus’s call to love ask that we

- acknowledge our own power and powerlessness in our own lives
- It asks that we implement the demands of justice in our own lives
- It asks that we correct the things that stand in the way of love in our own lives

That might all sound like a bit much, but it is the small thing. When I speak with folks who are tired and overstretched, I often ask them what they might be able to put down. If I am being practical about it, I might explain that there are three sections in a day, and suggest that they

only work in two of them, blocking out the third for self-care. It would be hypocritical if they then saw that the same day in my diary was full of appointments and that I was overstretching my own time – something I am all too guilty of. To love my neighbour by suggesting they protect their boundaries, I must first learn to love myself by protecting my own.

Of course, this is all leading towards Jesus's call to love our neighbour – to love other people. Some folks have expanded this to suggest that you should love your neighbour who doesn't:

Look like you
Think like you
Love like you
Identify like you
Speak like you
Pray like you
Vote like you
Act like you

And that type of love is necessarily political, it requires words and actions at least, perhaps even activism.

Again – this is what the law in Leviticus is calling us to when it tells us to do justice, avoid gossip and slander, not act out of oppressive stereotypes and binary divisions and not judge or moralise.

The church, locally, nationally and internationally so often breaks these rules and it surprises me, given that this is supposedly the golden rule, Jesus's main law, the most important lesson, that when churches break it there's no outcry. Every day Christians spend money and time in unjust ways, gossip, exaggerate and tell stories about other people, stereotype people, facilitate culture wars and judge others. And in case you are wondering if I am doing just that right now – I do some of this too. We are all human. But these faults don't make church meetings or media headlines, because all too often the focus nationally is on who is doing what with their bodies and locally is on what can or can't go up on the walls.

We can't avoid this, but we can stop hiding these realities and actively and visibly strive to do better.

Remember the dinky doors? Sometimes, putting God's love which is justice into action is about looking for a little bit of wonder. It is about changing our focus. It is about looking away from the little niggles that we spend most days worrying about and dreaming something better into being.

When a community member rolled their eyes in response to today's reading, they suggested that the antidote to sharing the same old message time and time again, or perhaps 'doing things the way we've always done them' was to shift our focus. To look somewhere else. To pay attention to something better.

When we were out looking at Dinky Doors last week, a stranger – a young adult walking by with bags of shopping – stopped my colleague from another city and asked what we were doing. He asked me to explain. I gestured to the crowd of young people excitedly taking photos of the 'wonder emporium' door and explained the concept in a similar way to how I explained it to you during our sharing together time. That stranger then asked 'Who has set it up? Is it for a particular business?' I explained that it wasn't, it was just a collective of artists wanting to bring a bit more wonder into the world, to shift our focus, to help us dream of a better reality. We might describe it, here, as God's kingdom. Her response? "That's amazing – long live the revolution!"