

### **Introduction**

I have been thinking this week about what it means to be a good neighbour and two incidents in previous parishes come to mind. When I was in Hackney one morning early I heard a sudden ringing at my door bell. It was quite insistent and I was quite annoyed. When I opened the door my neighbour from down the road was standing there. She said, "I just wanted to check that you are OK. I see someone has tried to break into your house. She pointed out that someone had tried to get in through my study window. She wasn't my only neighbour who rang my bell that day.

When I lived in Harlow and had a local pub I used to visit regularly I was sitting having a drink with a friend one night when I noticed my next door neighbour at the bar attracting my attention. He asked me: "Are they looking after you OK?", I replied that they were and he turned to the landlady, who he plays golf with and said to her, "Look after her she's my neighbour".

Neighbours are interesting things. We all have them, people who live near to us and to some extent share their lives with us. How I care for my garden wall, my bramble bushes, the amount of noise I make, the amount of rubbish I leave around, whether I respond to their burglar alarms or not all affect their lives and how they behave affects me.

Our new testament reading this week deals with the question "Who is my neighbour?" It is a well-known passage. We hear that a lawyer wanting to test Jesus out asks the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". Jesus turns the question back to him and making him answer his own question asks him, "What is written in the law?". "Love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your strength and your entire mind and love your neighbour as yourself", responded the lawyer. "You have answered the question correctly" Jesus replied, "Do this and you will live"; But this wasn't good enough for the lawyer - he wanted debate and he also wanted clarity.

In those days the lawyers and religious leaders had expanded the original 10 commandments into hundreds of laws that spelled out in minute detail what was required of God's people. It was almost as if they felt that provided they knew the formula and stuck to it in the tiniest point they would be OK. So wanting to clarify the issue and to justify himself in his own actions, or perhaps in his own lack of love for his neighbour, the lawyer asks, "Who then is my neighbour?"

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Jesus' response is to tell one of his most familiar and well-loved parables "The story of the good Samaritan" which tells of a man beaten and left for dead and needing help. Jesus describes the behaviour of those who pass by, a Priest, a Levite and a Samaritan and ends the story with the question, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man?. What Jesus is doing here is pointing out that the Lawyer has asked the wrong question, "Who is my neighbour?" which is a theoretical question, and after telling the story shows that the right question is, "To whom can I be a neighbour?" - Which is a practical question.

In his story Jesus uses two extremes to illustrate who a neighbour might be. On the one hand we have the Priest and Levite, who surely by nature of their office and profession ought to have been ready and willing to give aid to the distressed traveller. On the other we have a Samaritan man, someone who was despised by the Jews and someone with whom they had no dealings. When considering the question "Who is my neighbour" the Lawyer would have considered that only Jews could fall into that category. People from any other nation would not be worthy of consideration. To a Pharisee it would only be those who were as righteous as they considered themselves to be - everyone else (even Jews) would count as sinners. Thus the supercilious attitude the Pharisees showed towards the Publicans and prostitutes in the Gospels, and in another of Jesus' parables.

So to Jesus' audience "neighbour" would be very narrowly defined and what Jesus is doing here is challenging that attitude in the most shocking way he can. The person who actually shows true love and compassion is someone from a despised race who would ordinarily be dismissed out of hand by the Jews as being of no account at all. Jesus deliberately shocks the Lawyer by forcing him to consider the possibility that a semi-pagan foreigner might know more about the love and compassion of God than a devout Jew blinded by their preoccupation with pettifogging rules.

So the Priest and the Levite; the religious establishment, saw the man and passed by on the other side of the road. They not only failed to help the man but actually put distance between him and themselves. What might their reasoning have been? Why might they find themselves unable to help?

- Well, he was unknown to them and they may have felt he wasn't their responsibility.
- For all they knew he may have been attacked through his own fault.

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- They might have been preoccupied with pressing business and had no time to stop.
  - They may have been afraid that if they stopped in that lonely place they too might have been attacked.
  - Their concerns might have been religious. The man was left for dead so they wouldn't be able to tell if he was still alive without touching him and that meant that if he was dead they would have defiled themselves and be unable to carry out their religious duties. They may have been more concerned about the implications to themselves if he was dead than that he might be alive and in need of their help.

On one level all those reasons might seem sensible. But the problem is that they were selfish and dealt only with the needs of the Priest and Levite not with the needs of the injured man. Selfishness is very common. Cheap charity - where it costs us no more than a small donation is also common but the self-sacrificing kindness of heart that doesn't care how much trouble is involved in helping others is much , much rarer.

There are two main points to Jesus' parable.

1. In order to please God we need to be ready to show kindness and Christian love to everyone that is in need, not simply to family, friends and relations.
2. The Samaritan's compassion for the injured man was not simply confined to sympathy, (the sort that says, "Oh how terrible!" yet walks away without doing anything to help) He acted as well, and in acting spared no pains or expense in befriending the man. What he showed was a practical love that involved time, money and trouble to himself.

That is what Jesus defines as loving our neighbour and as his followers we have to ask ourselves the question, "What are we doing to help those in trouble?"

It is interesting the way Jesus tells his story. In describing the actions of both the Levite and Priest he says, "and when **he saw** the man he passed by on the other side". Their response to seeing the man's plight was to walk away. In another of Jesus' parables which deals with how we can inherit eternal life, The Parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus describes the judgement at the last day when all people will be divided into two groups, "sheep" and "goats".

*Read Matthew 25:33-40*

The question the sheep ask is when did they **see** Jesus in need and help him. Jesus' reply is that whatever they did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of his they did for him. What this means is that **anyone** who is in need is our neighbour and Jesus expects us to help them, in fact, more than that, failure to help will be judged and judged as harshly as if it is Jesus himself we are ignoring. Turning our back on those in need is tantamount to turning our back on Jesus himself.

There are two difficulties we face in our society at the moment.

**The first is that with the changes to the welfare benefits** and the steep increase in the cost of living many of us are struggling to survive and finding life very hard indeed. That makes us less able to consider other people's problems.

**The second is that we suffer from compassion fatigue.** The news is brought into our homes via the television, radio and newspapers. Every day we see terrible images of poverty and acute suffering and we have become accustomed to thinking that there is nothing we can do to help. We may think in situations of such enormous need my little mite of aid will be next to useless. We have become used to seeing homeless people sleeping on our streets. We have become used to people selling the Big Issue or begging on street corners. We have even become used to the fact that there is real poverty in our own country –There are 3.6 million children living in poverty in the UK today. That's 27 per cent of children, or more than one in four. We have become hard hearted and accustomed to passing by on the other side without so much as a pang of conscience.

You may have heard of Jackie Pullinger, who left a comfortable life in England during the 1960's and went to live and work in the walled city in Hong Kong - a place ruled by gangs and drug barons where the absolute scum of the earth lived. She has brought help and healing and Christ's love to thousands of people and is still working amongst the homeless drug addicts. A couple of years ago at a Christian conference I had the privilege of hearing her speak about her life and work. I have never encountered anyone with such passion for the poor or such concern to respond in a practical manner to suffering and need.

Her response to these two parables is to say that, as Christians, if we **see** someone in need and walk away we will be judged for it in the long term and she says, "If you are going to do nothing about it

don't look! - because if you look and do not respond you are turning your back on Christ himself and he will judge you".

In fact if you look at the great commandment "Love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your strength and all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself", you could say that the parable of the sheep and the goats shows us that in loving our neighbour we are loving God himself. So taken to its logical conclusion we show our love for God in the way we love our neighbour - in the way we respond to the weak, the helpless, the needy and the suffering. If we turn our backs on them we are turning our backs on our Lord and do not love him as he demands.

Hang on a minute Angela, I can hear you thinking, that's all well and good but how does that work in practice and do you really expect me to go to Hong Kong to work with drug addicts or to Africa to work with the starving?

Well God certainly does call some Christians to do that and he could even be calling you - but he certainly calls **all** of us to care for the weak and needy and suffering where we are. We aren't necessarily called to sell all we have and give it to the poor but we are called to pay attention when we see people in need.

That may mean not ignoring the person selling the Big Issue in Cambridge next Saturday, or stopping and offering to buy a hamburger for someone sleeping on the streets. It might mean sticking up for people at work when we see them being bullied instead of keeping our heads down. It may mean offering to baby-sit for a single mum we know and giving them the money for the cinema or special treat for themselves.

I can't tell you how to love your neighbour - because you know who it is that you see in need. But I can remind you that Jesus tells us we need to love them in the same way we love ourselves. So that means first of all noticing their need and then imaginatively responding with our time, our money and our trouble.

Let's pray